

SYMBOLISM IN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

Everything in the Church must have meaning for the worshipper. The plan of the building, the position of the various articles, the design of the Holy Table, Font and pulpit all are important. If there are any windows, carvings, hangings or drapery, they should convey some Biblical meaning or they are useless.

Dr. George Docherty of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, U.S.A., said recently in a sermon preached in Wellington Church, Glasgow, entitled 'Trumpets in the Morning' that his Church had recently been redecorated and had had new windows inserted, etc. Someone said, 'A waste of money', but, said he, 'We now have a glorious Church full of colour and a set of windows ending with Christ in glory radiating the joy and gladness of life.'

A symbol is 'A sign by which one knows a thing, an arbitrary or other conventional mark, a creed, compendium of doctrine or a typical religious rite such as the Eucharist'. The word symbol is derived from the Greek word *symbollein* which means to 'piece together'.

It should be stated that what follows will deal with symbols etc. as used in the Reformed Branch of the Holy Catholic Church (see Plate B).

Plan Form

The earliest plan form is to be found below certain Roman Churches in Rome, notably that of San Clemente near the Colosseum where one can find the house of Saint Clement. A plain rectangular room formed the early Church of the same name. In the centre of the room a Roman altar had been converted into use as a table for the celebration of Holy Communion. Such a form can be seen in somewhat larger scale in some of the Churches of Fife such as Newburn and Ceres.

The next plan shape to be used by the Christians was the so-called Basilica or Roman Judgement Hall. This was rectangular in plan with an apse (semi-circle) at one end. In the centre of the apse sat the judge in a large chair. This became the Bishop's throne or in our day the position for the chairs behind the Communion Table. Sometimes the rectangular form had aisles but could be a plain rectangular cube. Many of our Scottish Churches have this form; the position of the former Bishop's seat becomes (in many cases) the seat at the back of the pulpit.



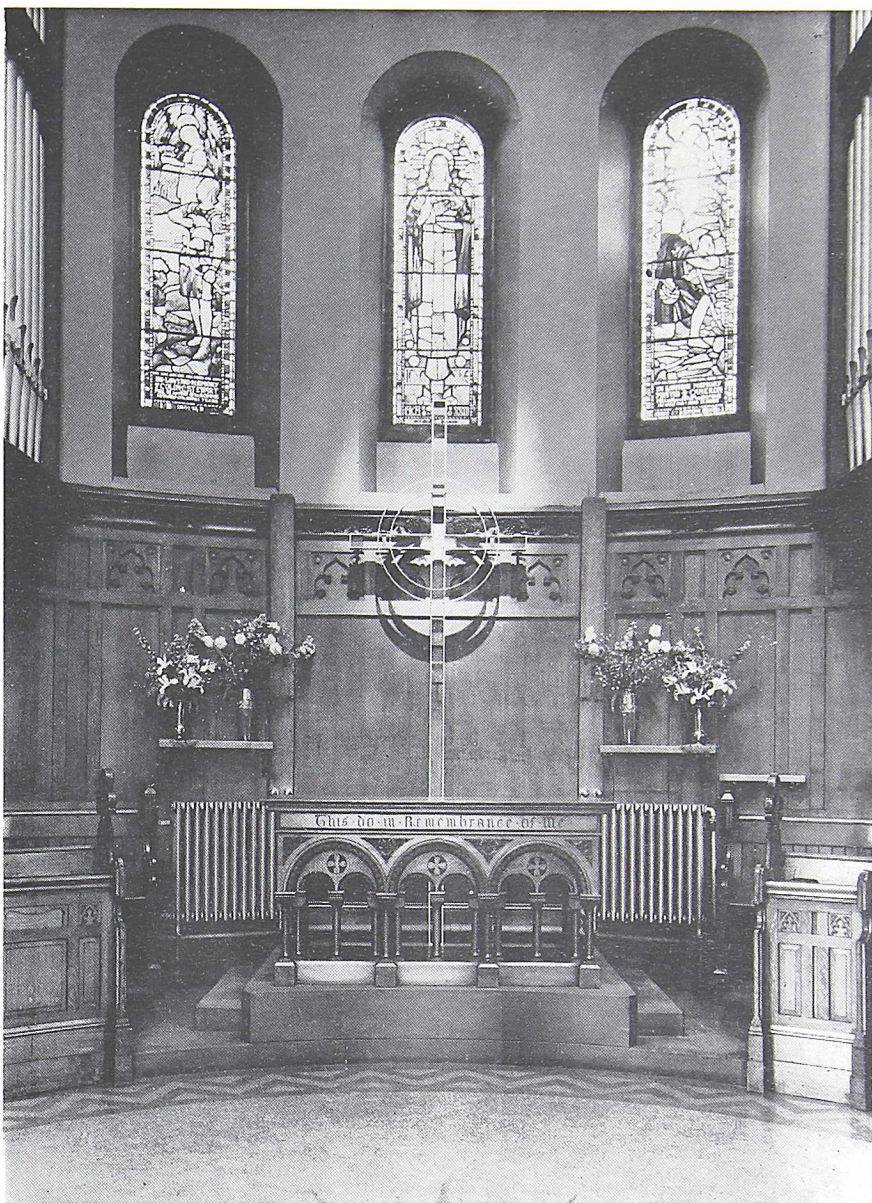


Plate C. SCOTSTOUN WEST PARISH CHURCH

The Celtic Cross is in bronze with the seasons of the Christian Year in different colours in recessed panels. The table has on the front and ends five consecration crosses commemorating the five wounds of the Master.

◀ **Plate B. VICTORIA PARK PARISH CHURCH**

This church is built on the plan of the Greek Cross with a very large central square area. The Sanctuary or chancel is one arm of the Cross. There are two Transepts and the fourth arm is occupied by the Choir Gallery with the organ at the rear.

The Holy Table has on it the signs of the Trinity. The Triangle and the interlacing circles (at ends) the font is circular, the Pulpit rectangular with a Fall for the season of Trinity. Below the Fall are the letters Alpha and Omega, the First person, on the Fall, four abstract flowers each for one of the Gospels with a fifth flower reaching out to the Acts of the Apostles studied in addition to the Gospels at this season and the circle for the Holy Spirit, the third Person. The Cross has on it, in recessed small panels, the different colours of the Christian Year, also the crescent moons for Ascension from the Dominican Convent Chapel at Venice which was completed in 1951 by Henri Matisse.

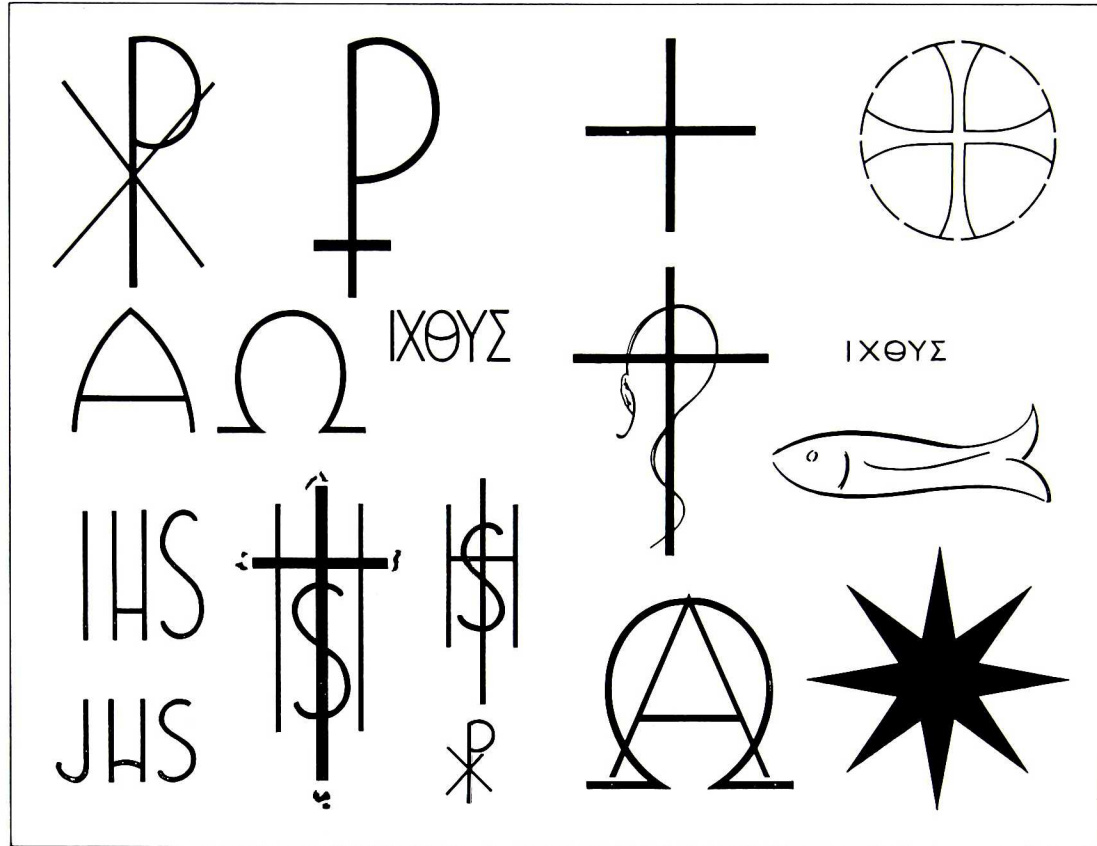


Plate D. SYMBOLISM IN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

The cross plan came to be commonly used for Churches with the Holy Table in the head arm. The different parts of the cross are interesting; the long arm is usually called the nave, from the word 'Navis', a ship. This part of the Church building is generally rectangular in form based on the old ships with seats across for oarsmen, the congregation being the crew who are actually rowing the ship. This, the people's area—the people tossed on the stormy seas of life seeking refuge in the ship, the Church. The arms of the cross are called transepts; each may have an entrance or special seating: these could be called the hands of the Church, etc. The head is called the Chancel or choir from where the act of worship is conducted and where the sacraments are celebrated, the chief functions of the Church. The head of the cross where the head of the Master rested, is therefore the most important part in the plan form.

Later, the head arm was 'knocked off' and the tee plan came into being particularly in Scotland. This was the Reformers' answer to the Cruciform Church which they considered too Roman. At the head of the tee the pulpit was placed with the communion table in front symbolizing the centrality of word and sacrament.

Recently, in Scotland, there have been used six-, seven- and eight-sided plans and also circular plans for churches, symbolizing creation, the seven spirits of God (Revelation), Holy Week and the Circle of Eternity.

Cross Sections

It is one thing to define the plan of a Church and quite another to arrange the section. In the simple rectangular plan the height is of importance; also the form of the roof, which can so greatly assist the scale of the building. Both the small rectangle and the basilica form lend themselves to flat ceilings, usually with pitched roofs on the exterior, so giving a somewhat domestic effect. This can be particularly seen in the case of the room type or of a large reception room in the basilican case.

The Cruciform plan on the other hand tends to have a fairly large area at the crossing with a tower over this area. Sometimes the Holy Table is placed at the crossing but more often at the end of the head arm of the cross. The Pulpit is usually found somewhere in the crossing where each part of the congregation can see and hear the preacher.

The Tee form was devised so that the people could be grouped around the central dais. Sometimes the arms of the tee have galleries with decorative stairs outside. This arrangement gives a somewhat theatrical effect. Other shapes mentioned allow the ancient tent form used for the Ark of the Covenant, etc. to be reproduced.

Decorative Symbols

The most ancient symbol in use in the Christian Church is the fish. When one considers the importance the fish played in the life of Christ this is very understandable. The early Christians used to draw the fish in the dust of the road as an identification mark. The Greek word for a fish, 'ichthys', was also used as an acrostic, each letter being taken to mean something; Iesus Christos, Theou Yios Soter, Jesus Christ God's Son, Saviour. This became a motto. The word is used on Pulpit Falls and sometimes on Communion Tables.

Probably the next oldest symbol is the 'chi-rho', the first two letters of Christ in Greek depicted with an 'X' and 'P' interwoven. This again is used on the Holy Table and on Pulpit Falls as well as on other parts of the furniture.

Another sign sometimes used is the Saltire Cross with a vertical line through it. This stands for Jesus Christ and is a follow on from the 'chi-rho'. Sometimes a square equal arm 'Greek' cross is used with a saltire and signifies Christ crucified.

The cross itself is, of course, a common sign, either the Latin form, that is, with a long bottom arm or with four equal arms, the latter being the Greek Cross form. This also represents the four Gospels, each of equal importance.

From Ezek. 1:10 comes the description of the four beasts which came to be the symbols for the four Evangelists, the eagle for Saint John, the winged ox for Saint Luke, the angel for Saint Matthew and lastly the winged lion for Saint Mark. Sometimes one finds these signs on Lecterns or even on the roofs of Churches.

The Burning Bush, the sign of the Church of Scotland, has an interesting story. It comes from the thorn bush, the lowliest of all the species of trees, representing the condition of Israel in exile being the lowliest compared with other nations. Further, in order to give Moses an illustration of His humility God descended from the exalted heaven and spoke to him from a lowly thorn bush instead of from the summit of a lofty mountain or from the top of a stately cedar tree. The sign of the Burning Bush became a reality when the word of God descended upon Mary and she was united to His human nature. Christ, true God and true Man, carried the likeness of sinful flesh upon the cross that sin might be overcome forever and thus the great sign that Moses had seen in the desert was fulfilled.

The tree itself symbolizes the eternal cycle of life and death and resurrection. It is a figure as well as a pledge of community life, represented by its branches.

The Christmas tree, in its present form, is of comparatively recent origin. Princess Helena of Mecklenburg gets the credit for intro-

ducing the Christmas tree to England in 1840. The custom of placing Christmas trees in Church apparently started in Northern Germany after the Reformation to counteract the Roman Catholic custom of having a representation of the crib in Church.

The Star is one of the signs used at the Christmas and Epiphany Seasons. It recalls the just who obey God's commands and declare His Glory: 'We have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship him' (Matt. 2:2).

Every Church has a foundation stone usually laid with due ceremony. The idea of this is clearly expressed in Isa. 28:16, 'Thus said the Lord God. Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation, he that believeth shall not make haste.' 'Christ is the foundation stone, for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ', so we read in I Cor. 3:11.

It is not often realized that the door is also symbolic, though of course in the great medieval cathedrals great emphasis was laid on this. The door is the holy gate through which the faithful enter into the joy of the Lord. Some of these had carved on them the story of the Lord's Resurrection, others His Ascension, yet again the story of the prudent virgins on one side and the foolish on the other. This reminded the faithful that they were entering into an earthly Church and foreshadowed their final entry into the door of Christ's Wedding Hall, to which they should not come unprepared.

Communion Symbols for the Holy Table

The vine which appears on many Communion Tables was in oriental mythology thought of as the tree of life in opposition to the fig tree, the tree of death.

Another common plant used symbolically on Communion Tables is the stalk of wheat. The whole story of our redemption is reflected in the life of a grain of wheat, which is sown in a furrow and buried in the earth: dying in darkness, it sends its roots into the ground to receive a solid footing; out of the depths, it rises high in the air bearing fruit a hundredfold. At harvest time it is cut and brought to the threshing floor. There the good wheat is separated from the chaff and stored in barns until it is brought to the mill and ground into flour. Thus the grain dies only to live again, it is destroyed only to become useful. The ears of wheat are the faithful born through the death of Christ. They remain in the protection of the Church until the harvest day of Judgement when wheat and chaff are separated, the latter to be burned, the former to be stored in heaven. In life they share the fate of the Master, being cast into the furrows of the earth. The grain dies only to live and disintegrates only to become useful.

Other symbols which are appropriate for the Holy Table are the Cup and the Dove. The cup represents the sacrifice of Christ, the outpoured blood of the Master and the Dove the descent and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Baptismal Font

The shape of the Baptismal Font is also interesting. This is best circular so as to represent eternity. When one is christened one is safe for always, for eternity, because one has become wedded to the Church. Sometimes Fonts are hexagonal representing the creation. 'In six days God created heaven and earth', man is recreated at Baptism.

The octagonal font is also common, and there are several meanings, one is that in six days God created the old world including man, the seventh day was the day of rest and the eighth that of the new Man of grace and salvation. An alternative is that taking the eight days of Holy Week as the basis, on the sixth day the Redeemer exclaimed 'It is finished', on the seventh day He lay in the tomb and on the eighth He rose again.

On fonts we also sometimes find correctly the dove, the cup and a stalk of wheat, so showing the Holy Spirit present at Baptism and also the promises of eternal life through the Sacrament.

The position for the Font is also of importance. Baptism is the first act in a person's Christian life. The Font was, therefore, formerly placed by the entrance to the Church. This we have largely lost in the Church of Scotland apart from a few cases such as Glasgow Cathedral or the Churches designed by the Architect Dr. MacGregor Chalmers. The Font is usually found in the chancel so that the children can be baptized in the face of the congregation as laid down by John Knox.

There are of course several ways in which baptism may be carried out, such as submersion, immersion (the head dipped only), affusion (water poured over the head) or aspersion (the water sprinkled over the head), the most common method in Scotland. Each of these affects the design of the Font.

The Pulpit

The shape of this varies also and may follow much the same shape as the Font. Like the font it can be rectangular or square when it represents the four-square gospel.

Each season of the Christian Year is heralded by changing the pulpit falls and other covers in the Church. This really represents a kind of calendar in the Church. Also, some Churches use different coloured falls for special days, for example, the red fall may be used

on Remembrance Sunday. The red fall is used at Pentecost and in some churches throughout Advent.

The cycle of the Christian Year begins with Advent when the colour of the fall is red or violet. At Christmas the colour is white and so to Ash Wednesday when the colour changes to Lenten Purple. This lasts till Easter Sunday when white is used and continues to be till Pentecost when red is used, after which the green colour of Trinity takes its place.

So the red of sacrifice or full triumph becomes the green of fertility during the season when the regeneration of the earth comes to full fruition.

On the falls it is customary to have certain designs or symbols, the most common being the IHS sign. This has several meanings;* when it is depicted with the I through the cross of the H it represents the battle cry of the Emperor Constantine 'In hoc signum vince', In this sign conquer. Sometimes the ends of the I and the cross of the H are prolonged and made into flowering ends so depicting the living cross. It is of course because the I is taken through the cross of the H, so forming a cross, that the meaning above can be given.

When the letters are placed straight after one another in line the meaning is 'Iesus Hominum Salvator', Jesus Saviour of Men. There is of course a modern meaning for the sign, namely, 'In His Service'.

Other symbols are used on pulpit falls such as the chi-rho which we have already mentioned, or a consecration cross in its circle. This latter is a Greek cross with a circle around it and was used in medieval times to define various parts of the Church Building where the Bishop halted when consecrating a Church. There were fourteen of these. It is, of course, quite wrong to use such a design on a pulpit fall.

The most difficult fall to design is that for Trinity, because here one must show the three persons of the Trinity. This is sometimes done by taking the eye as the first person, the all seeing eye of God, rays to depict the second person and some form of vegetation for the third, the Holy Spirit constantly coming alive through regeneration. Alpha and Omega can also be used for the first person, taken from the text in the Rev. 1:8.

Another symbol for the Trinity is the equilateral triangle, each of the three persons thereby being of equal importance, or by two triangles penetrating, or again, three circles interweaving can be used.

* The original explanation of this sign would appear to be that it represents the first three letters of the word 'Jesus' in Greek Capitals, and it is so used in Greek New Testament MSS. In this form it is also carried over into the Latin Bible, just as 'XP' is found and not 'CHR'.—Ed.

The cross itself is also used often on pulpit falls, usually without any figure. It is interesting to note the difference between a Celtic and Latin Cross and also between a crucifix and bare cross (*see* Plate C).

The Celtic cross has a circle usually around the crossing arms, so depicting that the cross has grown out of eternity. It has superseded the worship of the sun; it cancels that out, so to speak, so that this becomes the cross of resurrection. In contrast the crucifix lays emphasis on the suffering and martyred Master, the dying Christ. The bare Cross, the most common of all, stands for the sign of sacrifice, the positive sign that Christ died for our sins.

Flowers

The display of flowers in Church is one of the most difficult things to do correctly. They, of course, stand for the continual goodness of God to His people. They are best placed on wall brackets behind the Holy Table, thus allowing the wall to assist the displayer. They must not be placed on the Communion Table, which must be kept clear and ready for the Sacrament at all times, or on the Font whose sole function is for the Sacrament of Baptism.

The Use of the Building

When an architect designs a Church, always a challenge, he usually has in mind how it should be used. Unfortunately, his wishes are seldom adhered to and the Church is used in a way not intended in the design.

It does not appear to be readily recognized that the Pulpit is designed for preaching or leading discussion, not for Prayer or the Reading of the word or conducting the whole service. The reading of the word should be carried out at the Lectern or Book Stand, the fourth piece of furniture not so far mentioned, which can have any of the signs described on it or be plain, save for the Bible. The reason for this use is that in the Reformed Church the Bible is usually solemnly carried in and placed on the Lectern, from which it is then read. The Lectern brings the word nearer the people than the higher and more remote pulpit from which it is preached. It allows greater flexibility in dealing with the problem of reading the word than the pulpit and facilitates for example, the participation of the congregation in reading.

Prayer is for all. The role of the Clergy is to lead the people in prayer, not to pray at them, as happens when the pulpit is used for this purpose. Prayer desks are therefore used for this purpose placed so that the Clergy do not face the people from them. Should there

be no prayer desk the side or end of the Holy Table should be used. These desks sometimes also have falls, which are best plain in the correct season colour.

The Holy Table, placed centrally, is used for the Sacrament; it can be used also for receiving the peoples offerings, this usually on an alms dish which should be clearly displayed on a bracket on the rear wall of the Church before being used, thereby being shown to be lifted from this and brought forward to ensure that the act of receiving is reverently and fully accomplished. Consecration Crosses are sometimes appropriately used on alms dishes so signifying the Consecration of the peoples' offering to God's Service.

There is no point of having symbols which are not used at all times. The movement during the service from the Prayer Desk to the Lectern for the Lessons, to the Pulpit for the Sermon and to the Holy Table for the offering and of course at Communion for the Sacrament, assists the people to concentrate on the parts of the service and uses the Church building symbolically as it is intended.

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