

Symbols in the Orthodox Church
Re-Catechism 5
Dr. Maria-Fotini Polidoulis Kapsalis

This evening I was asked to speak to you about “Symbols that are used in the Church.” But before we explore various symbols, I have to first explain what we mean when we say symbol. As most of you have probably guessed, the word symbol comes from the Greek word σύμβολον from the root words συν-, meaning “together,” and βολή, “a throw”. Thus, symbol has the approximate meaning of “to throw together”. So two things are brought together, first something that is real and second something that represents that which is real. “A symbol, therefore, is something such as a particular mark that represents some piece of information. For example, a red octagon may be a symbol for "STOP". On a map, a picture of a table might represent a campsite. Numerals are symbols for numbers. ... Personal names are symbols representing individuals.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbol> My name, Fotini, is a symbol that represents the real me.

L. Ouspensky writes that “Symbols of the Church serve as important and powerful tools for educating newly converted Christians.” As anyone can see, our Orthodox Church abounds with the use of symbols, and this use of symbols in the Orthodox Church is anchored in Scripture. These symbols are those realities, which have the power and ability of manifesting God to human beings. In other words, these signs carry us beyond ourselves into the true union

and knowledge of things that are eternal and divine. Symbols help to make visible the invisible.

Andrey Ageyev, writes that

Symbols reveal at the same time as they hide. They never completely capture the reality, which they seek to express; they always leave something unsaid. This allows symbols to serve as the proper language for what Orthodox theology calls “mystery”. Through symbols of the Church God penetrates his creation and reveals himself to us through our channels of sense. The mother Orthodox Church has always used visible things to help us understand and not to forget invisible realities and meanings that are beyond the reach of our senses.

A person experiences the faith in the Orthodox Church through its art and symbols. A person experiences the faith in the Orthodox Church through its art and symbols.

Among the Christian symbols that we have already mentioned in past presentations are those found in the various church services, especially those of the Divine Liturgy, the bread and wine, wheat, oil and water, and the vestments of liturgical celebration with the meaning behind their various colours, the church music and the icons. I will not repeat the meaning behind these symbols as we have already dealt with them in previous sessions, but I will continue to address other symbols that we have not previously discussed.

Virtually everything you see in an Orthodox Church symbolizes and calls to mind some aspect of our meeting with eternal Divinity. Our church Architecture is a symbol.

(For a detailed illustrated layout of the traditional interior of an Orthodox Church visit

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodox_church_architecture.)

One of the oldest symbols for the whole church building itself is that of a ship. More specifically, the ark that Noah was told to build. The symbolism here is, while the world may be torn by the tempests of sin and attacks of the devil, in the Church (the Ark) we are safe and protected as were Noah, his family and the chosen animals. For this reason most Orthodox Churches are rectangular in design. Another prevalent shape for an Orthodox Church is the cross-shaped. The symbolism here is obvious. Yet even though the Architectural patterns for Orthodox Churches may vary, the symbolic layout of the church remains the same.

The dome draws our yearning and aspiration upward toward God and the spiritual life. All church domes celebrate in architecture what is accomplished by the Eucharistic Sacrament - the communion of heaven and earth. A single dome symbolizes the One Head of the Church, Jesus Christ; three domes stand for the Holy Trinity; five domes point to Christ and the Four Evangelists.

The traditional open Church has no pews or chairs. The faithful stand during worship services out of reverence and humility before

God. The absence of fixed pews give the worshiper freedom to move about comfortably in the Church and feel at welcome and at ease. We are free to venerate icons and light candles, give the greeting of peace to our neighbours, as well as to bow and do prostrations during worship.

The iconostasis, a prominent characteristic of Orthodox Churches, is a wall or screen of icons that separates the Holy Altar or as some call it Sanctuary from the Nave. For us, the Altar symbolizes the heavenly realm and the Nave the human realm. The Holy Altar is the most sacred place in Orthodox place of worship. The square, self-supporting altar is located in the center of the area behind the iconostasis. The altar as the place where the Body and Blood of Christ is both consecrated and kept is both the throne of God and the Tomb of Christ. Each time the Divine Liturgy is served on the altar, the whole life of our Lord Jesus Christ his birth, life, death and resurrection are made present realities. The altar is where God's Presence is manifested. It is from the Altar from which the Holy Light of Pascha is given to God's people. It is from here, that the Life-Creating Mysteries come forth in the reading of the Gospel and in Holy Communion.

Beyond the Architecture of our Churches, are the articles that we use in the church.

Fr. John Koulouras has often used the expression "we are so much more than smells and bells". He uses this term to refer to the incense

that we use. It is true that first time visitors to an Orthodox Church encounter our extensive use of incense that rises up from a jingling incense burner or “θυμιατό”. To those who do not know it is only smells and bells, but to those who live Orthodoxy, the use of incense **is** so much more.

The Orthodox Church follows the Bible – both the Old and New Testaments - in its use of incense (Ex 30:8, Ps 141:2; Lk 1:9; Rev 8:3). Most Orthodox Christians understand that incense is the symbol of the rising up of our prayers. Our prayers are the spiritual sacrifice that we offer to God, and like incense they are viewed as sweet-smelling fragrance in the Kingdom of God.

But most don't know that the incense burner itself is full of symbolism. There are four chains that hang from a ring. On the chains there are 12 bells. The four chains represent the four gospels. The ring holds everything together, and represents the eternity of the Godhead, who holds everything together. The 12 bells symbolize ... the 12 disciples or apostles upon whose teaching and mission the church grew. Even the charcoal that is lit and burns is steeped with symbolism, as it is to remind us that our faith is to be on fire like the burning coal. The bowl, top and bottom, represents the body of the church, which offers prayers to God. The top part of the cup represents heaven, and the bottom part of the cup symbolizes the earth. So what we have in the incense burner is a reminder that the Church triumphant in heaven and Church militant on earth are joining together in prayer – symbolized by the rising incense - to worship and

glorify the eternal God who was revealed in Christ Jesus and preached through the apostles and proclaimed in the gospels.

The Church Fans that are used represent the Six Winged Angels that are also called Exapteriga or σεραφεΐμ. These angels are a type of celestial beings. They are mentioned throughout the Old Testament in the Book of Isaiah as fiery six-winged beings that are constantly attending on God. They appear again as celestial beings in a prominent Hellenistic work, the Book of Enoch, and in the New Testament in John's Book of the Revelation. They occupy in medieval and modern Judaism the fifth of ten ranks of the hierarchy of angels, and in the Christian angelic hierarchy the highest rank. As they attend the throne room of God in heaven, in the Altar they remind us of the reality which is depicted within.

Candles burn before the icons and on the altar, signifying the light of truth given by the Lord, illuminating the world with spiritual radiance. Candles also symbolize our soul's burning love for God and love of God and the spiritual joy and triumph of the Church. The oil that is burned brings to mind of the mercy of the Lord. In Greek it is almost a play on the words Eleon and Eleos.

Beyond church articles, we see various symbols in church art. Whether on icons, wood carved furniture, vestments, and so on.

The fish is one of the oldest Christian symbols that we often see today in our churches, (as well on the back of many automobiles).

Tradition states, that in the days when Romans persecuted Christians, Christians used the fish mark as a secret code to show the way to the meeting places and tombs. The symbol was also used to distinguish friends from foes. According to one ancient story, when a Christian met a stranger in the road, the Christian sometimes drew one arc of the simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, they both recognized each other as Christians.

As early as the first century, Christians made an acrostic from this word: Iesus Christos Theou Yios Soter, (ICTYS) i.e. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, using the Greek word for fish "ichthys."

The anchor of hope has become a Christian symbol because of the great importance that the anchor played in navigation. Sailors regarded it in ancient times as a symbol of safety. The Early Christians, therefore, adopted the anchor as a symbol of hope in future existence. They gave to this familiar emblem a new and higher significance. In the teachings of Christianity the virtue of hope occupies a place of great importance; Christ is the unfailing hope of all who believe in Him. So ultimately the anchor became the Christian symbol of faith in the hope of salvation. For this reason, the anchor almost always also incorporates a cross.

Animals are also used extensively as Christian symbols, especially birds.

The Phoenix – This mythical bird, believed by ancient peoples to burn up and rise anew from its ashes, was an early symbol of the Resurrection.

The double-headed eagle is a very popular symbol used in the Orthodox Church. It is most commonly associated with the Byzantine Empire. In Byzantine heraldry, the heads represent the dual sovereignty of the Emperor (secular and religious), thus in its heraldry, it represented the Church and the State. At times it was also a symbol representing the dominance of the Byzantine Emperors over both Eastern and Western Lands. The usage of the double-headed eagle survived as a decorative element in the Greek Orthodox Church, which was the inheritor of the Byzantine legacy during the Ottoman Empire. It is now used as the symbol for the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Another bird that is used symbolically is the Peacock. It is often used to decorate the wood carved iconostasis, icon stands, Lectern stands and even bishop's thrones. Not only do these beautiful bird feathers symbolize God's magnificent artistry, the peacock's beautiful feathers shed and then replenish. Thus, they remind us of Christ's death and resurrection making the peacock a symbol for the risen Christ.

The Dove is the final bird symbol. Although later Christians associated the dove with the Holy Spirit, in ancient art the dove represented the believer's soul, rising above earthly cares after death.

There are other animal symbols that represent Christ, such as the lamb and the lion.

The Lamb provides us with a twofold meaning. First, the lamb in the arms of the shepherd symbolizes the believer, safe in Christ's care. Second, the lamb alone symbolizes Christ himself—the symbol of the New Covenant whose sacrifice "takes away the sins of the world." When symbolizing Christ, the lamb is usually shown carrying the Cross.

A lion-like lamb, which rises to deliver victory after being slain, appears several times in the Book of Revelation. Many Christian writers such as C.S. Lewis in the Narnia series used this image to portray Christ like characters.

Beyond animal images, and symbols, Christ is also represented in the following ways:

The vine. Jesus named himself -- "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15:5), can be seen throughout the art in the church, on vestments, iconostasis, icon borders, thrones, etc. This brings to mind how we are all united in Christ. Ultimately the vine symbolizes the Eucharistic wine that when we partake unites us fully with Christ and each other.

The crown and staff used by the bishop are symbols of Christ's kingship. The crown is a symbol of royalty dating back to ancient times. In the Church, the crown represents two seemingly opposite themes: the one being the divine life of Christ, (His kingship) which is obvious, and the other his crown of martyrdom. This dual meaning is also found in the crowns in the wedding sacrament. The staff symbolizes the staff of the good shepherd who guards and protects the sheep. It is a reminder to the bishop of his ultimate role and responsibility for the souls under his protection.

Among the more graphic Christian symbols in the Church are the initials and letters of Christ's name (O Ω N) which is always inscribed on his halo in icons, and means "I am". If you remember the meeting that Moses had with God at the Burning Bush where he asked God for his name, the answer was, "tell them that I AM has sent you." As Jesus is the word of God made flesh, any time that God has spoken in the Old Testament it is attributed to the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is therefore, the one who is, was, and ever will be. He is also known as the A and Ω, which means the beginning and the end, the one who created time, and who will reign at the end of time (Rev. 1: 8).

The Chi-Rho (Labarum) – This symbol combines the first two letters of Christ in Greek, chi and rho. The labarum, as it is called, was a term denoting a military leader's standard or rallying symbol. Oral tradition states that Constantine the Great claimed to have

received a vision of the labarum, and used it to lead his forces to victory.

There are symbols that also represent the Trinity.

The triangle of the Trinity is often shown as an equilateral triangle with an eye in the centre. This is used to show the equality of the three persons of the trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and how they are united as one in the one triangle. The eye of God's omnipresence was later added to the triangle to show that the divine sees all, knows all, and is present everywhere.

However, of all the symbols of Christianity, the Cross is the "pre-eminent symbol of the Christian faith". Interestingly it is almost nowhere to be found in early Christian art—or else commonplace but hidden. The reason for this is unclear. One can only speculate as to why the Early Church hesitated to use the cross. Maybe it was because Roman Crucifixions were still constant reminders of the sacrifice of Jesus.

The unique Russian Orthodox, or three-bar cross consists of three horizontal bars instead of the more familiar one bar. The top bar bears the sign placed by the Romans above Jesus that stated his "Crime" -- "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." This sign reminds us today that Christ is the King of Glory. The footboard, which was used by Roman executioners in Christ's time, is slanted up on the

right for the thief who repented and down on the left for the thief who taunted Christ.

There are still many other symbols that are used in the church -- all of which indicate some aspect of the saving presence and action of God in the world.

“The use of symbols is a mode of revelation and communion, which passes beyond that of mere verbal or intellectual communication.” <http://oca.org/OCchapter.asp?SID=2&ID=49>. If symbols are artificially made-up, logically explained, or reduced to mere “illustrations” whose meaning is not understood by the viewer, then they have failed in their purpose, to lead human beings to Christ, His saving act and Salvation.

Sources:

<http://www.oca.org/OCchapter.asp?SID=2&ID=49>

<http://www.stnicholasberks.org/symbolism.html>

<http://www.dorogadomoj.com/de132lea.html>

<http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/2009/0902fea2sb1.asp>