

Christian Symbols

The use of symbols in Christian art and architecture goes back to the very infancy of the church. As the teacher in school employs a black board to impress her lessons on the mind of the child do the church has always employed pictures and symbols to impress the spiritual truths on her children. One example, among many, is the letter IHS which in Latin means Jesus the Saviour of Men. St. Patrick-St. Anthony Parish has in the band of leaded glass windows high up in the circular sanctuary wall the symbols of the twelve Apostles. The following is the list of the symbols and their origin:



St. Peter: St. Peter's most usual shield shows two large keys crossed like the letter X. They recall Peter's confession and our Lord's statement regarding the Office of the Keys, which He committed to the Church on earth.



St. James the Greater: The usual form of this Apostle's shield show three scallop shells, two above and one below. The scallop shell is the symbol of pilgrimage.



St. John: St. John's most usual shield has upon it a chalice our of which issues a serpent. Early writers state that an attempt was made to slay this Apostle by giving him a poisoned chalice, from which the Lord spared him.



St. Andrew: The most common form of St. Andrew's shield is a cross shield, with its ends reaching the border of the shield. St. Andrew is believed to have died while preaching the Gospel in Greece, on a cross of this sort.



St. Philip: This Apostle's most usual shield show a tall, slender cross and two loaves of bread, recalling his remark when our Lord fed the multitude.



St. Bartholomew: His most usual shield shows three flaying knives placed vertically. He is said to have been flayed alive and then crucified.



St. Thomas: This Apostle's shield shows a carpenter's square and a vertical spear. This Apostle is believed to have preached the Gospel in India. There he was stoned, show down with arrows, and left dying alone, until a pagan priest ran him through with a spear.



St. James the Less: This Apostle's shield shows a vertical saw, with the handle upward.



St. Matthew: This Apostle's usual symbol is a shield upon which are three purses, referring to his original calling. He said to have been crucified on a Tau cross.



St. Jude: This Apostle's symbol is a sailboat with a cross shaped mast. This Apostle was a tireless missionary, having visited Arabia, Syria and Mesopotamia.



St. Simon: His most familiar symbol is a book upon which lies a fish. This is given him because he was a great fisher of men, through the power of the Gospel.



St. Paul: This great Apostle's shield is often shown along with the other Apostles. The most common form by far is an open Bible bearing the words Spiritus Gladius, and behind the Bible a Sword of the Spirit, cross-hilted.