

# What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## Christian Symbols

Christian Symbols are nothing new – literally! He built us to understand and to communicate through the use of symbols. The use of symbols, therefore, has been a feature of every culture in all periods of human history. God instituted and promoted the use of symbols for and amongst His people from the beginning.

The meaning of any given symbol, however, is not intrinsic; symbolic meaning is always *taught*, passed on from person to person, generation to generation. A symbol standing alone has no use or meaning; it becomes symbolic through the explanation, and the sharing, of its meaning.

Christians have always used symbols to tell people – especially each other -- about the faith. Some symbols recall a story from Jesus' life. Others remind us about an aspect who God is and what He has done for us. For many contemporary Christians, however, the meaning of certain ancient symbols are a mystery; the inter-generational sharing of the meaning has fallen out of practice.

The list of symbols presented here falls far short of being comprehensive; they are among the most common, and most ancient, of symbols. We will also look at a few predominantly Lutheran symbols and their use and meaning. They are not all exclusively Lutheran, but are more likely to be encountered in Lutheran churches than elsewhere.

### The Cross



Biblical use: Matthew 10:38, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Galatians 5:11, Galatians 6:14, etc.

The Latin cross is the most familiar and widely recognized symbol of Christianity today. It is thought to be the shape of the structure upon which Jesus Christ was crucified. Though various forms of the cross existed, the Latin cross was made of two pieces of wood crossed to create four right angles. While the Latin cross is in a “t” shape with the lower part extended, the Greek cross has all extents the same length. The *globus cruciger* (cross & globe) is typically a Latin cross positioned over a circle, which represents the world (IOW, “Christ for the World”).

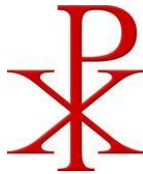
Often use simply to communicate “I am a Christian” (jewelry), or “this is a Christian place” (signs, steeples, etc.) The cross in all forms communicates Christ's sacrifice of Himself on our behalf, and His resurrection in victory over sin and death.

## **The Crucifix**



Predominantly Roman Catholic, but also used in some Lutheran churches, the crucifix depicts the body of Christ still on the cross. This form brings emphasis to the sacrifice and suffering of Christ. Most protestant churches tend to portray the empty cross, emphasizing the resurrected, risen Christ.

## **The Chi Rho**



When Christians began to copy the handwritten pages of the New Testament, they developed a set of abbreviations for the most important words like, “God” or “Lord.” The Chi Rho is one of these.

Χριστος ( “*Christos*” ) is the Greek word for Christ. The *Chi Rho* combines the first two letters of the word into a symbol for Christ. Christians moved it from the pages of the New Testament to windows, clothes, and Christian jewelry.

## The Staurogram



The staurogram, like the *Chi Rho*, developed from an abbreviation in the manuscripts of the New Testament. Scribes wrote the staurogram in place of the word σταυρος (“*stauros*”), the Greek word for Cross. It combines the letters *tau* (τ) and *rho* (ρ) to form an image that looks like a man on a cross.

You can find the staurogram on stained glass windows, religious clothing, and jewelry. Through it, we see Jesus on the cross and remember his atoning sacrifice for us.

## The Fish, or “Ichthys”



This may be the symbol with which you’re most familiar if you’re stuck in traffic a lot in modern America! You’ve seen it on jewelry, stamped on books (or almost anything), or on the trunk of the car ahead of you. Like the cross and crucifix, it is a very common symbol used to mark someone as a Christian.

No one knows exactly how the fish became a symbol for Christians. Tradition has it that Christians drew the symbol on the ground to identify meeting places or individual Christians without tipping off the authorities. One such tradition describes a meeting between two Christians who were strangers. One Christian would draw one side of the ichthys. If the other person finished it, he could be trusted.

The letters of the Greek word for fish (ἰχθύς) form an acrostic:

Ιησους	Χριστος	Θεου	Υιος	Σωτηρ
Jesus	Christ	God’s	Son	Savior

The use of “fish” also reminds us of Jesus calling simple fishermen to be His disciples, and how He told them they would become “fishers of men.”

## **The Alpha and Omega**



The Greek letters Alpha (Α) and Omega (Ω) remind us of passages from the Bible, especially from Revelation, where Jesus says that He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last letter.

Both Old and New Testaments use this image of the first and the last to show God's eternity (see Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12.) When applied to Jesus, it emphasizes that he is truly God, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. He is eternal, almighty, and all powerful God.

## **The Lamb of God Triumphant**



Revelation describes the struggle between Satan and God. Jesus is symbolized as “the lamb that was slain”, but He is also victorious over Satan, sin, death, and hell. The symbol used in the church, therefore, is the Holy Lamb, with a military banner over His shoulder.

This image shows Jesus as a conqueror, who leads the forces of heaven against our enemy, Satan, to defeat him forever. The cross shows us that the victory does not come from military power, but by His sacrifice for our sins. Jesus did not defeat Satan and death with weapons or lightning bolts from heaven. He won by dying on the cross, and rising from the dead.

## **The Triquetra**



*Triquetra* is Latin, meaning “three cornered”, i.e., a triangle or otherwise being a shape with three aspects. Originally, it referred to any triangular shape, but now it is a specific design: three interlocking leaf-like shapes.

In Christian symbolism, the three leaves symbolize the individual persons in the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The interlocking design reminds us that the three persons are still one God, three in one.

Neopagan groups claim that this symbol comes from Norse religion, but there isn’t any historical evidence of its use by the Norse. Regardless of any other use, this symbol has a long Christian history.

## **The Ship**



Ever since Noah stepped off the ark, ships have been used as symbols of God’s salvation. It was how he saved Noah and his family from the flood that destroyed sinful mankind. First Peter applies the story of the flood to us Christians and to Christ’s promise to us.

Many Lutheran and other Christian churches design their worship space to look like a ship. Decorative ribs run across the ceiling so it looks like the hull of an old sailing ship. It describes the church as the people where his salvation rests. It emphasizes community and unity in Christ.

## **The Shepherd's Staff**



The shepherd is a regular image in both Old and New Testaments describing the goodness of God. Everyone can quote the opening to Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Jesus calls Himself the good shepherd who protects, guides, and sacrifices himself for the sheep.

Jesus protects his people like a shepherd protects his sheep. With his rod, he fights off the enemy who would steal us away from him. With his staff, he guides us away from danger and rescues us when we need it.

## **The Dove**



The dove appears in the story of Jesus’ baptism in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In that scene, a dove descends on Jesus after he was baptized by John the Baptist. Immediately afterward, the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to face the devil.

Christians therefore use the image of a dove to represent the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. Many churches use the symbol of the dove during baptisms, or celebrations of the events of Pentecost in the book of Acts. The dove reminds us that the same Holy Spirit that empowered Jesus through his ministry is in us, too.

## The Pelican



Less common in modern American Christian use, the pelican is a symbol whose use originated in the middle ages. Legend has it that Pelicans would cut themselves in times of hunger so their babies could drink their blood to stay alive. The mother would sacrifice herself to save her chicks. While the legend is false, it inspired a symbol that survives to this day. The pelican symbolizes Christ, who shed his blood so we could live. The gospel of John shows this when he describes blood and water pouring from Jesus' side, the fountain of life for us.

## Luther's Rose



From Wikipedia:

In a July 8, 1530 letter to [Lazarus Spengler](#), Luther interprets his seal:

Grace and peace from the Lord. As you desire to know whether my painted seal, which you sent to me, has hit the mark, I shall answer most amiably and tell you my original thoughts and reason about why my seal is a symbol of my theology. The first should be a black cross in a heart, which retains its natural color, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us. "For one who believes from the heart will be justified" ([Romans 10:10](#)). Although it is indeed a black cross, which mortifies and which should also cause pain, it leaves the heart in its natural color. It does not corrupt nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps alive. "The just shall live by faith" ([Romans 1:17](#)) but by faith in the crucified. Such a heart should stand in the middle of a white rose, to show that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace. In other words, it places the believer into a white, joyous rose, for this faith does not give peace and joy like the world gives ([John 14:27](#)). That is

why the rose should be white and not red, for white is the color of the spirits and the angels (cf. [Matthew 28:3](#); [John 20:12](#)). Such a rose should stand in a sky-blue field, symbolizing that such joy in spirit and faith is a beginning of the heavenly future joy, which begins already, but is grasped in hope, not yet revealed. And around this field is a golden ring, symbolizing that such blessedness in Heaven lasts forever and has no end. Such blessedness is exquisite, beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable, most precious and best metal. This is my compendium theologiae [summary of theology]. I have wanted to show it to you in good friendship, hoping for your appreciation. May Christ, our beloved Lord, be with your spirit until the life hereafter. Amen.

## **Symbolic Numbers Derived from Scripture**

- 1 the Undivided Oneness of God
- 2 the two natures of Christ (the Divine and the incarnate)
- 3 the Three Persons of the Trinity, the three Magi and their gifts
- 4 the Evangelists and their Gospels; the material world; North, South, East, and West; the four seasons
- 6 the days of creation; creation fallen; imperfection
- 7 covenant, oath; perfection; the day God rested (the Sabbath being the sign of the Covenant with Adam); the seven colors the rainbow (which is itself a sign/symbol of the Covenant made with Noah); the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit
- 9 man's imperfection; the choirs of Angels
- 10 the Commandments; the Plagues of Egypt
- 12 the tribes of Israel; the Apostles; the hours of the day and the hours of the night; the culmination of the spiritual and the physical (3 X 4)
- 13 betrayal; Judas
- 33 the number of years of Jesus's human life



- 40** testing and trial; the years of the Deluge; the years of wandering in the desert in Exodus; the days Moses spent on Mt. Sinai; Christ's days in the desert
- 72** the number of years Mary (mother of Jesus) is said to have lived on earth, according to tradition. The belief that the Blessed Virgin lived for 72 years is not a matter of dogma or doctrine, but it is what is traditionally accepted as being the case and often reflected in Roman Catholic devotional materials.
- 666** the number of "the Beast" in Revelation. (Also 616 in some manuscripts. Not coincidentally, both 616 and 666 can be inferred as references to the emperor Nero).
- 1000** the "millennium" in pre-millennial dispensational eschatology (definitely NOT Lutheran!)

## **Symbols at Gloria Dei**

Many distinctly Christian symbols are on display and in use throughout our congregation's premises. What symbols and their meanings can you identify in the following images? Hint: In almost all of these images, there are actually many symbols, not just one. So look and think carefully – and Biblically – about what you see.











