

which, during his absence, should govern according to his instructions. And to the revolutionaries he spoke words of bitter truth and of charitable warning. "There is a class of perverse men," said Pius, "who, in the face of Europe, have covered themselves with the stains of ingratitude; worse still, they are marked with the blot which an angry God has impressed upon their souls; a God, who, sooner or later, executes the chastisements pronounced by the Church." A Pope at Gaeta is the Pope. God is always and everywhere. The Church is God's Church.

JOHN A. MOONEY.

EARLY CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM.

THE word *Symbol*, meaning literally, "that which is taken with," denotes, in its widest signification, an object by which through the sense of sight, some particular idea is suggested, awakened, and impressed upon the mind. When we pass in review the primitive monuments of Christianity, and especially the numerous remains taken from the Roman catacombs, we are immediately struck by the continual repetition of certain mysterious signs, characters, and, we might say, hieroglyphics, which are evidently meant to excite attention to some matter of faith or morals. This is early Christian sign-painting or symbolism. Sometimes, persons and events of the Old Testament are brought into relation with corresponding ones of the New Testament; sometimes, figures taken from the fables of paganism, such as Orpheus taming, by the sweetness of his music, the wild beasts that gathered around him; or Ulysses, turning a deaf ear to the melodious incantations of the Sirens, are ingeniously diverted to point a moral to the Christian observer; at other times, it is from pastoral life, or from that of the agriculturist and the fisherman, that the sacred symbol is taken. But the richest source of early Christian symbolism is found in a circumscribed circle of objects, whether real or chimerical, such as a bird, a fish, a dragon, the phoenix, the centaur, or a flower, a tree, an anchor, a crown. All these, and many more, now one of which the early Christian artist, who worked under strictly hieratic rules, was allowed to assume at pleasure, have been represented in a variety of ways upon the monuments of Christian antiquity, from the tomb of a pontiff-martyr to an insignificant

little brooch or lamp. Clement of Alexandria, writing of figures proper to be engraved upon a Christian's finger ring, says: "Let our signs be, a dove, or a fish, or a ship sailing before the wind, or a musical lyre such as Polycrates¹ used, or an anchor which was on the signet of Seleucus; and if one be a fisherman, let him remember the Apostle and children taken out of the water."

From this passage we legitimately infer that symbols were in common use among the Christians of the second century, and that—whatever their origin—a new and a religious sense was now attached to them. Indeed, we may affirm that the monuments of early Christian ages exhibit a vast system of symbolism, constituting a hidden or hieroglyphical language, capable of expressing by conventional signs the principal mysteries of religion. These symbolical images, especially those cut or moulded on lamps, rings, and other portable objects of domestic or personal use, were all so many tokens of recognition among the faithful; a motive for their use, besides the fostering of individual piety, being the veil of secrecy which Christians were then obliged to assume for their own safety and for the honor of holy things. Yet further, we would insist that this ingenious symbolism was deliberately contrived and intended as an easy and pious mode of instructing the young, the simple, the illiterate, the ignorant. It has been said, reproachfully, that the early Christians took their symbols, in great part, from the Jews, and through them from the Egyptians and other Orientals; and that paganism even furnished a constituent part of it. Granting this, to some extent, and principally for the sake of argument, we answer, that there would be nothing improper in such a course, because it is the intention with which a certain sign is employed, and the conventional meaning attached to it by those who employ it, which determines its sense. Surely, we need not go back to Moses, who, as the Scriptures tell us, "was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," or to the prophets, who spake in the rich imagery of the East, in order to find a sanction for the employment of symbolical language; for, our Blessed Lord himself constantly made use of allegorical speech and of symbolical figures. Let us remark here, that we write only of early Christian symbolism, of such, namely, which has been described by very ancient writers of the Church, or has been discovered on very ancient monuments, because it would be too vast a subject to include in one article that rich

¹ Polycrates, tyrant of Samos, was the patron of the lyric poet Anacreon. Seleucus, founder of the Græco-Syrian monarchy, was obliged to maintain a powerful navy to protect his long stretch of sea-coast. By "the Apostle" is meant Saint Peter, and allusion is made to the words addressed to him by our Lord after the miraculous draught of fishes: "From henceforth thou wilt catch men." (Luke v., 10.)

and wonderful class which may be called Gothic or mediæval symbolism, and which flourished on all sorts of monuments from the fall of the Roman empire to the revival of the arts in the fifteenth century. This, of course, is a very interesting branch of Christian symbolism, but should be treated under the Christian archæology of the Middle Ages, and begins with the very curious and often rudely illustrated treatise entitled *Physiologus* in Latin, and rendered by *Bestiare* in the magnificent "Mélanges d'Archéologie" of Cahier and Martin.

The symbols used by the early Christians either originated with them, or were borrowed from other sources and turned to a new and better meaning. Sometimes animals are found represented on the tombs of Christians, as a sort of *cauting* term (to use an expression of modern heraldry), by which the name of the deceased was indicated; thus a sow has been found on the tomb of a certain *Porecella*, an ass on that of *Onager*, a goat on that of *Capriola*. These names of lowly animals were sometimes assumed, and their figures ordered to be cut on their tombs out of a spirit of humility, as inscriptions testify. They were mostly, however, the names of slaves. Let us now descend to particulars, and indicate the principal symbols found upon ancient Christian monuments, and to which a uniform sense was always attached, so that any one of them was equally understood by the learned and the unlearned—by the Latin, the Greek, the Syrian, the Gaul, and the (converted) Barbarian.

The lamb is taken as a symbol, sometimes of Our Lord, and sometimes of a simple Christian or follower of our Lord. Since the special character of the Redeemer was that of Victim, the earliest and most numerous testimonies in the Sacred Scriptures speak of him under this figure. Thus, in Genesis, and in the prophecies of Isaias, and of Jeremias. St. John the Baptist alluded to Him under this figure; and the same figure is employed by St. Peter and St. John. This figurative manner of speech passed at once into the language of the Church, as is shown from Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Eusebius, and other ancient writers. In the first place, it recalled to the minds of the faithful the great truth that Our Saviour shed His blood on the Cross, without subjecting so sacred a subject to the ridicule of heathens, against which Christians were secretly warned by the Discipline of the Secret, called *Disciplina Arcani*. We may thus look upon the lamb taken as a symbol of Christ, to have been the Crucifix of the early Christians, and in following the various phases or manners of representation we see that gradually the figure melts away into the undisguised Cross.

The oldest manner of representing Christ under this symbol

was a lamb standing upon a hill or mountain, whence flowed four streams of water. It is frequently found upon the bottom of those gilded glass vases used in the *Agapæ* or Love Feasts of the early Christians, and upon their sarcophaguses or stone coffins. These, although a class of monuments comparatively more recent than the gilded vases, often show us, from the larger space the artist had to work upon, some interesting peculiarity, which serves to illustrate or to emphasize a collateral text of Scripture or a mystery of religion, as when, for instance, on a lamp discovered at Marseilles, two harts (deer) are seen refreshing themselves at the water that flows from underneath the feet of the lamb. Another class is that of the lamb bearing one or other pastoral attribute, as the milk-pail (*mulctra*), the crook (*pedum*), where we recognize unmistakably the Good Shepherd. The *Nimbus*, called in art the Halo or the Glory, is, in connection with figures of animals, exclusively used on the Lamb, as representing our Lord. In a number of ancient monuments, the lamb figures in such combinations as prove the intent of the artist, or rather of the Church instructing and directing the artist, to protest against some prevalent dogmatic error, as when after the outbreak of the Arian heresy, representations multiplied of our Lord in person, seated with the right hand uplifted in the attitude of teaching, and having a lamb at his feet, by which were symbolized the two natures: Uncreated, Eternal, Divine Wisdom—the *Logos*, or Word of God—and the Victim which could suffer and die to redeem mankind. But such a dogmatic intention, suggested by a passing error, is not the most usual one. The lamb was far oftener represented so as to keep before the eyes and impress on the minds of the faithful the sufferings of the Innocent One who died for them. Consequently, as little by little the Church developed the mystery of the Cross to the outward senses, the lamb is found with some indication of suffering, as when over the head of the lamb was shown the monogram of Christ, which was a disguised cross. In the sixth century we see the lamb supporting a cross-tipped staff—the *Crux Hastata*,—and sometimes we see the lamb reposing on a book, the mystical sealed Book of the Apocalypse. At a later period the lamb is “standing as it were slain” upon an altar, at the foot of a precious and ornamented cross—*Crux Gemmata*. Again in the same century streams of blood issued from the wounded limbs and opened side of the lamb. In some very ancient mosaics described by Ciampini, the precious Blood flowing from the side is received into a chalice, and from the foot of this and from the four feet of the lamb flow five streamlets, which again come together to form one river of life. In these most singular mosaics we see, doubtless, the first public expression of devotion to the Sacred Heart

and to the Five Wounds of Jesus, and we have also before our eyes a suggestion of the Sacrifice of the Mass and of the Seven Sacraments. Finally, towards the decline of the sixth century, a lamb is depicted or represented attached to the cross at the place where soon the Man of Sorrows will appear in human form, and the modern Crucifix will be revealed. Nevertheless, it was still customary, up to the tenth century and long after a human figure hung on the cross, to represent a lamb either at its foot or on the reverse. From this period down through the Middle Ages, the symbols of lowliness and of suffering are abandoned, and the lamb is accompanied with those of victory and triumph, as when the lamb supports a cross-shaped banneret called Standard of the Resurrection, or is encircled by a golden zone, to represent the divine power of the Saviour, as described by the prophet Isaias, "And justice shall be the girdle of his loins." Another peculiar form of symbolism is when the lamb is shown armed with a cross, and repelling a serpent, who represents the Evil One, the whole representation being drawn from this passage of the Apocalypse: "These shall fight with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them." In some cases the lamb is armed with a lance instead of a cross, and it has been suggested that as this weapon was, even among the heathens, as in figures of Pallas, or Minerva, a symbol of Wisdom personified, it may have been taken by Christians to represent their Lord overcoming the guile of the serpent by the wisdom of God. Finally the latest representations of the lamb as a symbol of Christ the Redeemer occur in the magnificent mosaics of the eighth and ninth centuries. These are ordinarily set in what are technically called in basilican architecture Triumphal Arches, which is that part of ancient church edifices separating the nave from the transept. The lamb is here represented as in the vision of the Apocalypse, resting upon a glorious throne, around which are four angels and seven candlesticks. At the corners of the arch are the four animals of Ezechiel, each with his book, and a little lower down the four and twenty elders stand, robed in white and holding crowns in their hands.

Coming now to consider the lamb as a symbol not of Christ but of Christians, we may quote the words of Northcote and Brownlowe in *Roma Sotteranea*: "It cannot be necessary to appeal to any authority beyond the discourses of our blessed Lord himself to justify us in saying that a lamb or sheep represented one of Christ's fold." As a symbol of Christians taken collectively, that is, as a symbol of the whole body of the faithful, it is frequently found on the fragments of gilded glass, on sepulchral stones, and later on mosaics. Here two lambs are represented issuing out

of two cities, and hastening towards another lamb standing on a mount. Sometimes these two cities have their names inscribed over them—Jerusalem, Bethlehem—and stand for the converts from Judaism and the converts from Gentilism. At other times, instead of the names of the cities, are found the indications: *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione*, the Church of the Circumcision, that is, Jerusalem; and *Ecclesia ex Gentibus*, the Church of the Gentiles, which is Bethlehem, because there, at the Epiphany or Manifestation, the Divine Infant—Incarnate God—was adored by the Wise Men or Magi. Here also we perceive an allusion to the fraternal union of these two antagonistic peoples in the love of the same Christ: "For He is our peace, who hath made both one," as St. Paul writes to the Ephesians. Sometimes the lamb is represented on early tombs and in ancient paintings, to signify the meekness, humility and innocence that should distinguish the followers of Christ. In this tropological sense the lamb is often found on early monuments, as witness those figures of females called *Orantes*, who, with outstretched arms (a disguised symbol of the cross), stand between two lambs—natural expressions of innocence—which is interpreted to mean that petitions and praises from pure hearts are acceptable to God, but that there can be no graces except through the virtue of the Cross. Sometimes, also, a lamb accompanied with the word *Innocens* or *Innocentissimus* indicates the tomb of some infant or child who has died soon after baptism. As a special symbol, also, of purity or freedom from the lusts of the flesh, the lamb is represented between two wolves, or other ferocious beasts. *Two* lambs, face to face, having a cross in the form of the Monogram, or a vase full of fruits or of ears of grain, indicate the tomb of husband and wife: in the former instance when they have been disappointed of issue; in the latter case when their union has been fruitful. The *Ram* is not to be confounded with the lamb or the sheep, but has a distinct rôle in Christian symbolism, founded on that passage of Genesis in which, after Abraham had given evidence of his faith and obedience, a ram caught by the horns in the briars was substituted for the sacrifice of Isaac. The ram is therefore a symbol of Jesus Christ, who substituted himself for sinners, and St. Prosper sees here a special image of our Lord crowned with thorns. At a later period in ancient Christian art the sacrificial idea is more particularly conveyed by two rams *affronté* with a Cross between them, which was a common decoration of the capitals of columns in early churches. In a secondary sense, the ram, which defends the lambs from harm, is, says St. Ambrose, commenting on the Forty-third Psalm, a symbol of Christ overcoming the devil; and since the Christian has strength to resist the Evil One through Jesus Christ, the ram is found on monuments relating to

baptism, and on finger rings dating from the ages of persecution. Indeed, St. Ambrose tells us that we should, like rams, overturn our infernal foes, relying on the strength of Our Lord, of Whom the horn is a figure, as in the Forty-third Psalm, sixth verse: "Through Thee we will push down our enemies with the horn."

Since the Scriptures frequently employ the deer, stag, hart or hind to convey certain moral ideas, the early Christians represented this animal in their monuments with a symbolical intention. According to its several special qualities it was looked upon as a symbol of Our Lord by Saint Ambrose; of the Apostles by Saint Jerome; of preachers, doctors of truth, of the faithful in general, by Cassiodorus; of the saints by Origen; finally of penitents. For instance, one idea drawn from the timidity and swiftness of the deer, was that the Christian must fear and shun the moral dangers—proximate occasions of sin—that menace the soul. Certain symbols being for the first time introduced or having already been received, obtained a special interpretation on the appearance of particular errors; thus the flying hart was used at a certain period as a protest against the heretical severity of the Cataphrygians who taught that it was not lawful for a Christian to seek to escape from persecution, although our Lord said: "When they shall persecute you in this city, flee into another." Tertullian adopted this error and seems indirectly to attest the use of the symbol: "I have known some of their pastors to be lions in times of peace and deer in times of persecution."

Saint Ambrose adopts the deer as a symbol of virgins, applying it especially to Saint Thecla, the first of her sex who suffered martyrdom and defeated the dragon, as the deer drawing its slender feet together leaps upon and kills the venomous coiled serpent. The deer was also regarded by the early Christians as a symbol of mutual assistance, from the alleged fact of natural history that in crossing wide and rapid streams the deer enter the water in a long strong line, each one, except the leader, resting his head upon the flanks of the one before him; and that when the leader is exhausted he falls to the rear to find a support, and thus all cross over in safety. As a symbol the deer has been found in the oldest catacombs, on extremely ancient lamps, on very early tombs and in mosaics. It was particularly associated with baptism, from the touching words of the psalmist: "As the hart panteth after the fountains of waters, so my soul panteth after thee, O God." Thus in a painting discovered in the subterranean cemetery of *San Ponziano*, which goes back to the seventh century, a deer fixes his gaze upon the river Jordan with an expression of intense longing after its refreshing waters. The Horse, either standing still or in motion, and sometimes decorated

with a palm attached like a waving plume to the side of his head is frequently observed on early Christian monuments. Antiquarians have thought that, when without any other adjunct, it was taken as a symbol suggested by Saint Paul's epistle, in which human life is likened to a race; and when the palm is attached, as a graceful ornament to the head, it is the symbol of a swift martyrdom.

Although the Hare is often found on sepulchral slabs, earthenware lamps and precious stones, its exact symbolical meaning is not clear; but from the study of other things found in connection with it, it has been supposed to convey the same idea as the horse. Perhaps the smaller and more delicate of these animals was considered more appropriate for the tombs of and the articles used by women and children; either animal symbolizing the Christian's race to reach the goal, as in the words of Saint Paul: "So run that you may obtain." In confirmation of this common idea, the horse and the hare are sometimes represented as running side by side. Twice on the tombs of children the hare is represented nibbling at a cluster of grapes; and it has been suggested that this harmless little creature symbolized the innocent soul of the child enjoying the pleasures of Paradise which was represented in Christian allegorical and figurative paintings and bas-reliefs as a garden of delight; although even here the primary idea of running in the race so as to obtain is obviously kept in view. From the fact that the hare is so frequently found on Christian lamps there must have been some special meaning attached to it in this connection; and it has been suggested that if, on the one hand, there is in this domestic utensil the idea of *watching* (which at once recalls our Lord's parable of the wise and foolish virgins) on the other we must see in this alert and nimble little animal which was said to sleep with one eye open, a symbol of *vigilance* and of promptness to answer, and run forward to meet the bridegroom.

Again the *hare* pursued by the *hound* was sometimes used,—cameos and intaglios with this subject upon them of early Christian possession having been discovered,—to signify the pagan persecutions; whereas the juxtaposition of a *ram* and a *hare*, such as is sometimes found on the bas-reliefs of ancient baptismal fonts, is supposed to signify that, in the battle of life, the conflict between grace and nature, to which (concupiscence surviving after baptism) the neophyte was subject, some temptations are to be boldly met—yea, in the laudable exercise of Christian perfection, may even be voluntarily approached—but that others are to be shunned and fled from, which recalls the epigrammatic saying of that master of the spirit, St. Philip Neri, that in temptations of the flesh cowards are conquerors.

The Lion was taken by the ancients as a symbol of strength and

watchfulness, this quality being attributed to him because he was supposed to sleep with both eyes open—for which story Pliny's Natural History is probably responsible. Solomon, after King David's instruction, made lions of silver and gold for the temple at Jerusalem; but, perhaps,—from the more general idea connected with this king of beasts, of royal pomp and of fierceness, so opposed to the lives of those early and fervent disciples of Him who said: "Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart,"—this figure is very seldom found on primitive Christian monuments. In mediæval archæology, however, the lion is a very common symbol, being constantly found at church porches, on episcopal chairs, on the *ambones* or pulpits whence the Scriptures were read, and on the candlesticks, and especially the paschal candlesticks, which were usually of immense size and of great beauty of design and material in bronze or marble or incrustated stone work. Travellers in Europe must have seen at the porches of some very old churches two lions—one on either side of the entrance—of whom one is represented playfully holding a child in its paws, whereas the other is angrily tearing a porcupine or other "small deer" with its fangs; in the first is symbolized the tenderness of pastors towards those young in the faith; in the second the avenging hand of pastors on contumacious and scandalous sinners, hence the *porcupine*, which was not supposed to keep its wickedness to itself as some other nasty animals do, but to be aggressive and discharge its fretful quills at passers by.

The Calf is often represented on the capitals of columns, particularly in very ancient churches. It was a symbol of Jesus Christ under the sacrificial idea of *Priest* and *Victim*, hence it accompanies the figure of Saint Luke the Evangelist, and of Christians as typifying guilelessness, and seems to have been suggested, in this sense, by the text of Saint Peter, in the Introit of the Mass for Quasimodo or Low Sunday: "As new-born babes desire rational milk without guile." It is mentioned by both Clement of Alexandria and Saint Ambrose.

The Serpent was taken by the early Christians as a symbol in three different senses. First, in sign of the victory of our Lord over the ancient dragon, in which sense it is not anterior to the reign of Constantine the Great. The serpent is thenceforward represented on gems and other small objects, coiled at the foot of the Monogram of Christ (which, as we have remarked, was a disguised form of the Cross), and later at the foot of the cross itself, expressing in the words of the Preface of the Passion: "That life might arise from that which produced death, and that he who conquered by wood, by wood also might be overcome;" a plain allusion to the serpent in the garden tempting Eve.

The once well-nigh universal tree and serpent worship, sprang from a perverted tradition of the Fall of man. Hence the serpent was in a particular manner the outward sign and symbol of idolatry; and although used in this sense with prudence and moderation at first (for the decisive overthrow of idolatry took place in the Roman empire only long after the triumph of the first Christian emperor); it was carried at a later period—as in the public and annual processions of the greater litanies, in a group with the cross—to represent death, and a paschal banner, to represent the resurrection. Secondly, a serpent was used by the early Christians, instructed in the word of our Lord: “Be ye therefore wise as serpents,” as a symbol of that cardinal virtue of prudence, without which, as Saint Bernard says, every other virtue would become a vice; and as this virtue is the fundamental one of good government, bishops were represented framed, as it were, within the encircled figure of a serpent, just as in the middle ages a serpent often formed the volute or curve of a prelate’s pastoral staff. Thirdly, the serpent was a symbol of the cross itself—by a sort of antithetical or associated or suggestive idea taken from the words of our Lord: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Its use in this sense was not long retained on account of the errors of the Ophites—or Serpent Worshipers—the Nicolaites, Gnostics and Manichees; and the numerous talismans, amulets and other minute objects on which this reptile figures are the remains of the followers of Basilides. Among the faithful the serpent was sometimes used as a symbol of the resurrection and of immortality, the habit of changing or sloughing its skin and of emerging from a mean state into a brighter and better one, easily explaining the reason. On the monuments of Egypt a serpent holding its tail in its mouth, thus forming a circle, was the sign of unbroken time or eternity.

Birds, real or chimerical, were frequently represented in painting, sculpture, mosaic, embroidery and on a great variety of early Christian monuments; generally, however, as mere ornaments. Sometimes, though, it is impossible—especially when we connect the representation with certain passages of Scripture or the Fathers—not to recognize a symbolical intention in lieu of an ornamental design. Thus the numerous representations in ancient Christian art—far down in the catacombs—of little birds disporting themselves amidst flowers and fruits are unmistakably a symbol of the souls of the faithful escaped from the trials and temptations of this world and now enjoying the delights of paradise; and we can cite here the figurative words of the Psalmist: “Our soul hath been delivered as a sparrow out of the snare of the fowlers. The

snare is broken and we are delivered." This symbolical interpretation is confirmed by the fact which has been verified that on slabs closing the subterranean graves of the dead the number of birds represented—painted, scratched or insculptured thereon—always corresponds exactly to the number of persons buried therein; one soul to each individual; one bird which represents in a material form that spiritual substance of each which springs from this world into the next to join the heavenly choir.

Birds confined in cages, representations of which have been found on paintings, bas-reliefs and gilded vases, are supposed to have symbolized the human soul within the prison of this material body, and also the confessors of the faith and the martyrs confined and tortured by their cruel captors.

Few early Christian monuments show us the eagle, although it was a common symbol in mediæval archæology. There can be no doubt, however, from the words of Saints Ambrose and Maximus of Turin and of other ancient Fathers commenting especially upon this verse of the 102d Psalm: "Thy youth shall be renewed like the eagle's," that this bird was used as a symbol sometimes of the resurrection of the dead, and at other times of the renewal of the life of grace in the soul dead to sin. Thus Saint Maximus of Turin takes the eagle which periodically moults its feathers as a symbol of the neophyte whose life is renewed in baptism. In heaven both body and soul will be renewed by glory, as here below the soul only is by grace renewed; hence in a very ancient painting in the subterranean cemetery of Priscilla *two* eagles are represented together upon the same globe.

The Cock figures very frequently upon early Christian remains, but especially on the tombs of the dead. It was taken as a symbol of the resurrection or awakening to a new life after the darkness of this world, because it is chancicleer's shrill clarion that announces the dawn of day. On sepulchral slabs this bird is represented in connection with certain formulas which leave no doubt of a symbolical intention. *In pace; Bene resurges; Surgatis pariter beati*, this on the *Titulus* of a husband and wife. It was also a symbol of vigilance. Hence when the Christians began to multiply churches above ground, the cock was often placed on the summit of the building to represent the vigilance of pastors turning alternately in every direction. It is especially taken by Saints Eucher and Gregory the Great as a symbol of preachers who announce amidst the darkness of error the truth which came from Him who is the true light of the world, and they quote the words of Job: "Who gave the cock understanding?" As a symbol of watchfulness and intelligence this bird belongs especially to the archæology of the middle ages. On some very

old sepulchral slabs two cocks are represented with lowered heads in the attitude of fighting; and it is supposed that they were then a symbol of tenacious courage and used to signify that those there buried had fought the good fight against the world, the flesh and the devil. This interpretation is rendered certain when a palm branch, as is sometimes the case, is associated with them. The Peacock, which, as Pliny observes, renews its elegant tail feathers with the spring, and the mythical Phoenix which was fabled to rise again from its own ashes, are found occasionally on ancient Christian monuments, and were unmistakably symbols of the resurrection; and the latter bird is so often found in connection with Saint Paul that it cannot be a mere accident, coincidence or ornament, but a symbolical tribute to that Apostle who in his Epistles and in the Acts spoke so eloquently of this consoling doctrine.

There is no other symbol except—as we shall see further on—that of the Fish, which is so frequently used by the early Christians, as that of the Dove. It appears on every species of monument, mural painting, mosaics, sepulchral slabs, lamps, candelabra, cameos, rings, brooches, and ornamented or gilded glass. We know how the dove figures in the Sacred Scriptures. Ancient baptistries were decorated with the figure of a dove—sometimes of solid gold—suspended from the ceiling, so that, with wings expanded, when gently swayed by the wind, it seemed to brood over the sacred font; as in Genesis, “And the spirit of God moved over the waters.” Our Lord, himself, proposed the dove to us as a symbol of simplicity; and the early Christians took it, besides, as an emblem of chastity, humility, meekness, and innocence in general. Sometimes, but rarely, the dove was intended as a symbol of our Lord, for the Greek word for this bird gives, if considered numerically—that is, taking the numerical value attached by the Greeks to each letter—the same sum that Alpha and Omega do; also, these two letters are never applied to any one else but to Him; and, if this sounds a little fanciful, the discovery in the very ancient catacomb of St. Catherine at Chiusi, in Italy, of a dove holding an olive slip in its beak and having a cross over its head, puts the symbol in a more certain light, and expresses the meaning of St. Paul to the Colossians, “Pacifying by the blood of the Cross the things which are on earth or in heaven.” The dove was also a symbol of the Christian soul; and a very ancient seal not only attests this, but indirectly, also, attests the sacred character of the Canticle of Canticles, which would not have been commonly read by the faithful, much less would its words have been used in a spiritual sense, were it reckoned among the *apocrypha*. On this seal a dove is represented with these words beautifully engraved around it, “*Veni si amas*,” “Come, if

thou lovest," which expresses, in almost identical words, the appeal of the Divine Spouse to the devout soul, "Arise, my dove, and come." (ii., 10.)

The Fish is very often mentioned by the Holy Fathers, and other early Christian writers, and is found innumerable times on ancient Christian monuments. It was a symbol, first, of our Lord, and secondly, of his followers. How, when, and by whom the happy idea was struck out that the Greek for fish, ἰχθύς, was a symbolical word of the greatest importance in the Christian sense, is unknown, although there is some reason for believing that it was discovered at Alexandria, celebrated from the very beginning for the number and intelligence of the faithful, and was first suggested by the initial letters of certain Sybilline verses. Observe, that this word represents the sum of Christian theology concerning our Lord: His name, His two-fold nature, His place among the Divine Persons of the Trinity, His priesthood, His redemption: Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, Θεοῦ, Υἱός, Σωτήρ—Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Saviour.

We cannot do better than quote the words of Northcote and Brownlow, in the second volume of "Roma Sotterranea," page 73, particularly as this figure is of the greatest importance in Christian symbolism, which some might be inclined to think was more imaginary than real, and, perhaps, even quite fanciful and arbitrary. Speaking of a recently-discovered painting in an ancient Christian cemetery, at Alexandria, in which is represented, precisely over the altar where the holy mysteries were celebrated, a banquet of our Lord and Apostles, in which figures a plate with two fishes and several baskets of bread; and, at a little distance, the miracle of Cana; and again, in another compartment, a number of persons seated at a feast, with this legend over their heads, "Eating the benedictions of Christ"; the whole undoubtedly representing the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ—the Holy Eucharist,—they say that the Christian artist "Has furnished us with a most precious monument, proving the identity, not only of Christian doctrine, but even of Christian artistic symbolism, both in the East and the West. We have shown the same truth elsewhere, by an appeal to epitaphs; we have shown that the same doctrines were expressed by the same forms in Rome and Alexandria, in France, in Egypt, and in Phrygia. Every baptized Christian understood them, whether he lived on the banks of the Tiber or of the Po, of the Loire, the Euphrates, or the Nile. In all these parts of the world, writers in books, poets in hymns, preachers in sermons, artists in painting, the very masons themselves on the tombstones made use of the fish in this symbolical sense, without a word of explanation. It is evident that, however unmeaning the figure

may have been to pagan eyes, or however strange it may seem to our own who are no longer familiar with it, it was as perfectly intelligible to contemporary Christians as the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt to those who used them, or the letters of the English alphabet to Englishmen."

The Dolphin, which is noted for its velocity, and this world being often likened to a sea, was an early symbol of the intense desire and indefatigable advance of the Christian towards another and better world. It figures, in large dimensions, on sepulchral slabs and tombs, and more minutely on finger-rings and slighter ornaments, when it is usually represented twined about an anchor. The anchor being a symbol of hope, and the Christian's only hope being in the Cross of Christ, and being, also, a disguised form of the Cross, this constant union of dolphin and anchor on small articles worn about the person seems like a symbolical rendering of this verse of the Psalmist, "It is good for me to *adhere* to my God, to put my *hope* in the Lord God."

Trees of different species have been frequently found represented on ancient Christian monuments. The great archæologists, Aringhi, Lupi, Boldetti, Buonarotti and others, struck by the frequent repetition of this symbol, have studied its signification with much care. The tree, then, is first a symbol of Jesus Christ, who is the Tree of Life. In this sense Origen takes it in his commentary on this passage of St. Paul to the Romans: "If we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, in like manner we shall be of His resurrection." Secondly, the tree is a symbol of man. In this sense it is taken by St. Jerome and Fulgentius, because his works are either good or bad, as the tree bears either good or bad fruit; and the former particularly founds himself on the figurative speech of our Lord in the seventh chapter of St. Matthew. Thirdly, trees decked in their foliage are a symbol of Paradise, the beauty of which is ever green and refreshes the saints. In this sense they figure in many mosaics and on many sculptured stones, and even in the diminutive glass cups or vases. The intercessory power of the Saints now reigning with Christ in glory, is shown in connection with this symbol in a very ancient picture of the virgin martyr Agnes, standing amidst umbrageous trees in the attitude of prayer. In this connection of trees in foliage representing symbolically the place of peace and repose, it is nearly thirty years ago, that, while studying at Rome this particular branch of early Christian Antiquities, we were touched by the exquisite appropriateness of those last delirious words of a famous God-fearing general: "Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees."¹ On tombs and sepulchral slabs we

¹ Stonewall Jackson.

sometimes remark a singular juxtaposition of trees, two being represented, one bare and the other covered with leaves. It has been interpreted to signify man's nakedness of good works—supernatural works—before baptism, and of his being clothed with righteousness after baptism. This seems to be the correct meaning, because two such trees figure one on either side of a neophyte who is receiving this sacrament. It may also be, as has been suggested, that these two trees thus opposed to each other were meant to symbolize the emptiness and vanity of this life and the fullness and joy of the life to come. The tree on sepulchres is often—especially when the kind represented is deciduous—a symbol of the change, the resurrection, the new life. The palm was used even by the heathens as an emblem of victory, and was adopted in the same general sense into the body of Christian symbolism. On tombs and sepulchral slabs the palm is generally accompanied by the monogram of Christ, to show that no self-conquest is possible except by virtue of the cross. The palm is next a general symbol of martyrdom. It does not, however, of itself alone present indubitable proof, when found on a sepulchral slab or tomb, that the deceased was a martyr; but taken cumulatively with representations of some instrument of torture, or on tombs in which the remains of linens once dipped in blood are found, or to which, imbedded in the now hardened mortar, phials which have contained blood have been attached, the palm is a most sure indication of martyrdom. The Scriptures contain, in many places, allegorical passages in which the vine figures, but leaving these and the writings of the Fathers, in which sometimes Christ and His Church, that covers the whole earth as this plant puts out its branches in every direction, is likened to the vine; it is remarkable, how often the vine, with its tendrils and its fruit, is represented in the mural paintings and on the bas-reliefs of the catacombs. Over and above any mere decorative design, we must see in this frequent repetition a determined purpose to keep before the minds of the faithful, in their confined and subterranean chambers, to which they were driven by unjust persecution, thoughts of a happy future, thoughts of Heaven. This view of a symbolical intention is confirmed by seeing little birds, and especially doves,—figures of souls released from the body—flying about amidst the trellis work, resting on vine branches, and pecking at clusters of grapes. Very often a single bunch of grapes is carefully represented on sepulchral slabs and on gilded glass used in eucharistic feasts. Now it is well known that the same symbol was used by the Jews of old to betoken the Promised Land, and there is no doubt that the early Christians, many of whom in Rome itself were converts from Judaism, retained the same symbol, but trans-

lated it from its more immediate and temporal sense to the remoter and eternal one, for, as St. Paul says, all these things happened to the Jews in figure. The Church having always used the word *Paradise*, which means, in Greek, a garden, to designate the abode of the just, Christian artists were naturally induced to decorate with flowers of various sorts the tombs of martyrs and the chambers of the catacombs in which those mysteries were dispensed which prepare man for Heaven.

Very often shells and conchs have been discovered in early tombs or stuck on the outside into the mortar while still soft, just before closing, or are seen engraved upon the slab. The frequent repetition in different parts of the Christian world of the same thing, clearly points to a fixed purpose, and to one not affecting a local belief, hope or scene, but to some general belief. This is no other than the dogma of the Resurrection; the idea being that, of the living soul breaking through death from its narrow prison of the body—the shell of mortality—which yet retains a pledge of immortality in the Holy Viaticum, by which it is not left altogether without, at least, some semblance of a continued mysterious existence even in the tomb, as the shell whence the living mollusk has departed still gives forth, when held to the ear, a sweet, soul-stirring music, awakening keen emotions and strange yearnings after we know not what, and distant impressions from we know not whence. It has been observed that the species of shell almost always used by the Gauls was the *Helix pomatia* of our conchologists, which, when it retires within its cover at the approach of winter, has the faculty of closing the entrance by a peculiar kind of thin but impenetrable membrane called the epiphragm, which it bursts open to issue forth at the approach of spring. This hibernation was aptly chosen to symbolize the silence of the tomb, which will be broken when the dead shall rise again at the last day.

The sun and moon have been represented on early Christian monuments in connection with our Lord as the Eternal Pastor, these celestial figures having been used by the pagans for symbols of eternity. They are also often, but at a comparatively late period, seen in representations of the Crucifixion, because these heavenly luminaries suffered eclipse and mourned with the Author of Nature when He died. The Star is frequently used on ancient Christian monuments. In the first order of ideas it is a symbol of the divinity of Jesus Christ and of His supreme dominion over all things in heaven and on earth, hence our Lord is sometimes represented between two or more stars. In another order of ideas stars are a symbol of His Church, and then they are always just seven in number. When, therefore, this particular number is found upon Christian tombs, erected, as may be conjectured, during a period of

schism or at the prevalence of some heresy, it indubitably stands for a silent protestation that the deceased sleeps in the peace of the one true Church.

On a small number of Christian monuments the signs of the Zodiac are represented. Boldetti has delineated a beautiful ancient bracelet, on the inside and outside circles of which the twelve Signs are engraved. It has been plausibly conjectured that far from serving a superstitious use, in the manner of the heathens, who were given up to astrology, it was piously worn as a constant reminder of the instability of human events and the mutabilities of fortune, and that *we* go away but *they* remain; nor can we doubt that the words of Ecclesiastes were familiar to the wearer: "A generation passeth away and a generation cometh, but the earth standeth forever."

The four seasons have been symbolically represented along with the figure of the Good Shepherd. It is in this connection an emblem of Providence, which provides our daily food and leads us, the sheep, to proper pastures.

Marble eggs and sometimes the shells of real eggs, therein deposited before closing, have been found in early Christian tombs. They were symbols of the Resurrection.

A hand issuing out of a cloud was always a symbol of the First Person of the Blessed Trinity, God the Father, because the hand is naturally an emblem of work, and the making of all things out of nothing, the creative act, is theologically ascribed to the Father.

However paradoxical it may appear, we can assert that in this age almost the only survivor of the early and mediæval symbolism of the church, is found in that decried but little understood science of heraldry which was essentially religious in its origin and was entirely suggested by the clergy, who in those times when it arose, were alone competent to interpret and to parcel out to deserving individuals the perishing fragments of such a system. (See Lord Lindsay's "Sketches of Christian Art," II., 49.)

ROBERT SETON.
