

The vast world of symbols in churches



There is a vast world of symbols in our churches and most of the symbols are very old. During the medieval times there were Saints depicted in our churches but they disappeared later on. During the Great Power period, the symbolic language was peeled away from within our churches and the decoration on many of the pieces given to the church were instead inscribed with the initials of the giver or a Coat of Arms. The symbols want to be helpful in our faith, for us to believe and in our beliefs. The purpose of symbols is to touch our heart. There is always a message in the liturgy in church. The symbolic language is embedded in the liturgy, in what can be seen and heard and what's done in the liturgy. It is vital that the language of symbols is understood by everybody even if you can't understand the language or read.

The fish as a symbol

The first Christians were living in a time when they were risking their life if someone else knew that you were a Christian. That's why there was a need for a common sign to help you to establish if the other person that you were meeting was a Christian or not. The fish became the sign. One person would draw half a circle in the sand, representing one half of the fish, and the other person would complete the sign with the part, the half circle, that was missing. The fish was used not only as a secret sign between persecuted Christians but also found its way into the early Christian art. Today visitors can find the fish in many churches, for instance on the altar antependium, on the baptismal font or on the chandeliers. But why a fish?

Why did the first Christians choose a fish as a symbol?

There are many stories in the Bible mentioning fish. One of them is the miracle of the bread and fish (John 6:1-13) and there is the story of Jesus sharing fish with his disciples on the shore of the Galilean Lake after he had risen from the dead (John 21:1-13) and the story of Peter finding a coin in the mouth of a fish (Matthew 17:24-27).

There are stories in the bible where you can tell that Jesus resemble humans as fish: *As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.*

Mark (1:16-17)

These stories touch us but they do not give the answer to the riddle. Is it possible that the answer might be found outside the Bible? Other writers within the primitive church used an imagery language where fish were important. Tertullian of Carthage, who lived in northern Africa about 160-225 AD writes in the book On Baptism: "We small fish, who are images of our (great) Ichthys (Fish), Jesus Christ are born in the water".

Jesus as a fish? Yes, if you get the meaning of every letter in the Greek word of fish there is a secret message hiding: Ichthys becomes Iesos Christos Theou Yios Soter becomes **Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.**

The individual who filled out the second half of the fish knew that the line drawn in the sand was supposed to become a fish. But they also knew that the fish was about a person- and just not any person...