

Catholic

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Sacred Symbols

AN INVITATION TO PRAYER

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Our churches are filled with images that speak about our faith. Although we may not always be aware of them, symbols surround us and connect us to sacred imagery, reminding us of our faith, and supporting us in our prayer as we celebrate the sacraments and engage in private devotions. They serve as testimonies to our Christian history, and honor the saints who led the way. Sometimes these images are borrowed from other religions, but most often they are of Christian origin. Some are quite obvious, such as a cross or crucifix. Others need to be explained, like a fish or a pelican.

That which appears simple or ordinary can hold great meaning. In a religious context, symbols enable us to express our faith in ways that would be impossible if we were to rely exclusively on words. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a symbol is surely worth a million. However, much of this witness is no longer recognized or understood because the meaning of imagery has been lost, forgotten, or distorted. If we wish to fully receive the messages behind these symbols and accept the invitation extended—to honor Jesus' name—it's important to recover an understanding. Let's begin by exploring related sacred monograms, acronyms, and images.

Sacred Monograms

Monograms and acronyms were used to communicate, in a partially hidden way, that a home belonged to a Christian family or that a tomb held the body of a Christian. This was especially important during times of persecution. Monograms combine two or more overlapping letters to form one symbol.

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Today, you can see monograms and acronyms carved into altars, painted on church walls, or embroidered on vestments. What do they mean? Many monograms refer to the name of Jesus Christ. The most common and ancient of Christ monograms is the combination of the Greek letters *chi* (X) and *rho* (P). These are often superimposed with the X placed slightly beneath the P. They are the first two letters of the Greek name for Christ, *Kristos*.

Another Christ monogram consists of three capitalized letters, IHS. These are the first two letters and the last letter of the Greek name of Jesus, which have been transliterated using the Latin alphabet. IHC is similar. Here, the letter *sigma*, the last letter of the Greek name of Jesus, is transliterated into a C, not an S. Another version is formed when I is replaced with J. The letters I, J, C, and S were interchangeable in the Latin alphabet until about the eighteenth century. In keeping with this pattern of transliteration, you might see IHS, IHC, JHS, or JHC.

All are monograms, or concealed ways to express the word Jesus. Another version of the Christ monogram is ICXC. This includes the first and last transliterated letters of the Greek version of Jesus (IC) and Christ (XC). Painted icons often contain these letters, but they are split on either side, with IC for Jesus on the left and XC for Christ on the right.



Sacred Acronyms

In addition to monograms, another combination of letters, acronyms, are a series of initials that only those initiated into the faith could read. A common example is INRI. Most crucifixes have these letters carved in the wood