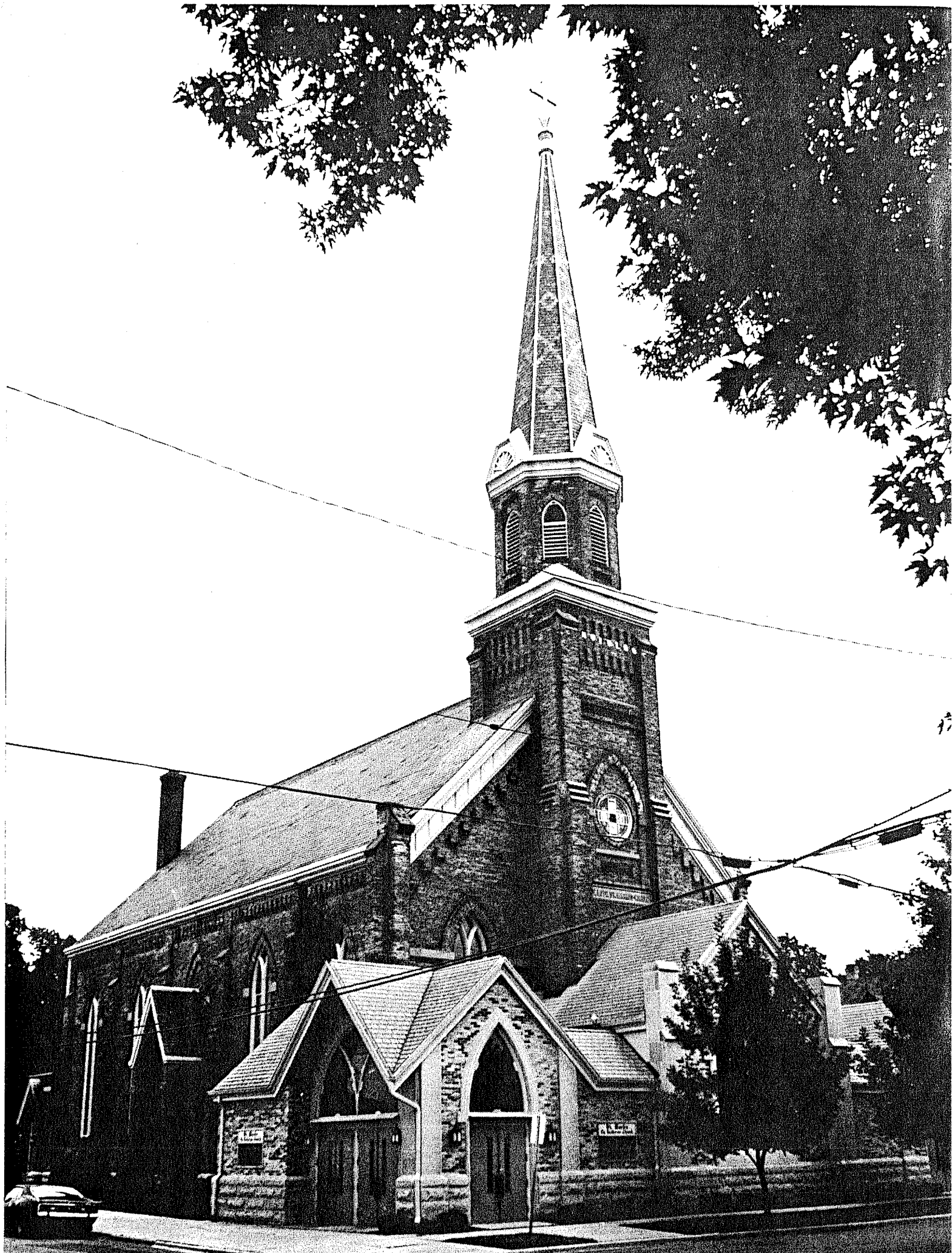


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CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM--THE SIGNATURE OF HISTORY  
ON ST. MARK'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, WATERTOWN, WISCONSIN  
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"Since God chose our hearts as His temple, we should be mindful, as we assemble here for worship, to come with repentant and contrite hearts. Only then will our service, including the beautifying of our church, be acceptable to Him." (The redecorating committee of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Watertown, Wisconsin, February 19, 1950.)

Some Jews made a pile of stones and considered what they should call it. The name they decided on was, "Ed." (Ed means "witness.") What could only be a pile of rocks to the casual observer, to future generations meant peace--peace and brotherhood between the two and a half tribes which settled trans-Jordan, following the conquest of the promised land (Joshua 22). It meant peace, because peace is the meaning they attached to it when they set it up as a "witness" that they all worshipped the same LORD God. That this was to be the lasting significance of this particular altar would obviously only be possible as long as that simple association was taught and passed along. In such "symbols" we don't get a photograph of history or a detailed account, but rather we see what people before us saw, and we learn to think of the same things when we see it. Symbols, in

this way, have all the appeal of an inside joke or a shared experience. Communication through symbols, even communication with fellow Christians down through the ages, implies a unique fellowship--a meeting of minds.

Without naming names, I call to mind a certain Protestant church building which was built at great expense. When the building was all completed, it was found that right in the center of the big colored glass window in the front of the church was the symbol that the Pope has on his flag. In a certain Catholic church Martin Luther's seal is found carved in the altar with the other symbols. If the people had known something about symbols this would not have happened. Especially, we as pastors learn about symbolism so that we can tell others about our church building. To be ignorant of such things could be an embarrassment.

A certain church in St. Paul, Minnesota has two statues on each side of its altar. Many strangers that come into the church say, "Why I have never seen a Lutheran church with a statue of Mary and Joseph in it!" Many of the members of that congregation could not explain the statues to the stranger, but after you have studied symbolism, hopefully you could make the proper answer, "If you will look carefully at the symbols in the hands of those two persons, you would see that they are not Mary and Joseph, but the Apostle Paul and John the evangelist.

A symbol is a familiar object used to express an idea. The word itself comes from two Greek words that mean "to throw" and "together." The word, "symbol," refers to the throwing together, or the associating of an idea (something that we think of and

know exists even though we can't see it or touch it or smell it or taste it) with a visible object (some familiar thing with which we are well acquainted). For example, a circle stands for eternity. Eternity is the idea; the circle is the familiar object.

However, if we want to talk more precisely, we must make a distinction between several terms. A "symbol" sets forth being and character and is given by God, with, usually, a Scripture basis for it. (The Hand of God, The Crown of Life, etc.) An "emblem" is a visualization or representation of an attribute, a doctrine or some theological truth. When applied to persons, it usually recalls an outstanding event in their lives. (The shields of the Apostles). A "figure" is an invention or legend--an imaginary creation such as the unicorn and the phoenix. Finally, a "type" is a representation of a historical character.

It soon becomes clear that as we step into one of our church buildings and look around, we are not merely looking at decorations. Certainly, much is lost to the uninformed observer, because, though this isn't the topic immediately at hand, even the very architecture of the church (sanctuary, chancel, transept, nave, and narthex all have significance) and the colors that surround the worshipper all have symbolic meanings. The things we see can become meaningless only if we allow them to. We could do this by choosing not to inform ourselves to make the associations, and by refusing to pass such information along. A symbol, after all, is not a picture. A cross is not the same as a picture of the crucifixion--a cross requires that WE RECALL THINGS NOT REPRESENTED, such as the body of Jesus, the nails, the

thorns, etc.

Many of the symbols which we use today come from the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God gave His people a complete set of ceremonial laws, telling the people to the exact detail how they should worship. Every bit of their "liturgy," every bit of their offerings, every bit of their priests clothing, every bit of what the priests and Levites should do, every bit of design in their place of worship, yes, every bit of their "decorations" were given them by God in exact detail. All of these things pointed to Christ. God wanted these things to be done exactly, because His plan of salvation was exact.

Things have changed now that Christ has come. Christ has come; there is no need to point ahead to him. In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul tells us that we are free--we don't need the ceremonial law: "Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Our reality is Christ, therefore we have Christian liberty in regard to our worship, designs, "decorations," etc. We may choose those things which we feel are best suited and most meaningful. We would certainly, however, avoid those things which might be misleading, even idolatrous, not to mention poor stewardship of our resources, all in light of Christian liberty. A worthy question becomes, "What symbols have Christians in the past used to stimulate worship and to educate?"

Symbols were used as a secret language by the persecuted Christians. By the use of symbols they could let one another know that they were Christians. Whoever wasn't a Christian wouldn't know what the symbols meant, and so he would not bother about them. The common example of this, of course, is that of the fish, which could easily be drawn in the sand without drawing much attention. The IXTHUS symbol also appeared carved on trees in a woods, and similar places to point the way to secret Christian gatherings.

But there is more to the use of symbols in times of persecution. They helped the early Christians to keep up their morale. In all the miles of catacombs with their thousands of paintings and markings, no expressions of despair are evident. (Caemmerer, 1983, p. 12) Living from day to day, some under sentence of death, these Christians were compelled to give visible evidence of the hope that was in them. They sent messages encouraging one another to withstand the ordeals they had to face. If they would see the crown of thorns, or three nails, or the scourge, they would remember that if the world treated the Son of God that way, they would also mistreat His followers. With these thoughts they could then bear with joy the sufferings they had to endure. On the walls they painted illustrations of Old Testament figures who were led by God through trial; Jonah, Daniel, etc. They depicted heroes of faith; apostles, martyrs, and friends.

When it comes right down to it, the "Golden Age" of symbolism was the Middle Ages. (Webber, 1938, p. 7) There are many reasons why this was a good time for the growth and greatest



use of symbolism, most obvious is the illiteracy of the peasants. Churches in those times were covered from top to bottom with symbols, because the ministers would tell the people Bible stories and point out the symbols which referred to the stories. The peasants are said to have understood quite well what the symbols stood for, and so they became extremely meaningful to them. Further, these same symbols were a way of advertising to the world what they believed, at a time when you no longer had to inconspicuously "doodle" a fish in the sand. Finally, symbols were used to help to identify the statues so prevalent in Middle Age churches. For example, the Apostle Paul was often shown with a sword in his hand because of his discourse on the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, in Ephesians.

Nevertheless, the manner in which symbols and related church decorations came to be abused in the Roman Catholic Church is well-known--and apparent from the response of Luther, for example, in the "Church Postils" of 1522. He defines true worship as that in which one abandons ALL self-reliance and places his complete trust in God. He then elaborates, "See, that is the proper worship, for which a person needs no bells, no churches, no vessels or ornaments, no lights or candles, no organs or singing, no paintings or images, no panels or altars....For these are all human inventions and ornaments, which God does not heed, and which obscure the correct worship, with their glitter." (Christensen, 1979, p. 43)

Luther's theology obviously called for a somewhat more discriminating use of religious imagery than had characterized

the Roman Catholic Church in the years preceding the Reformation. However, it is equally clear that the reformer by no means intended to eliminate the contribution of the artist to worship and teaching in the church. His essential requirement, consistent with Scripture, was that everything be done to praise and glorify God and in loving service to one's fellow man. As he had already expressed it in 1524, "Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudo-religious claim. But I would like to see all the arts...used in the service of Him who made and gave them." (Christensen, p. 65)

Therefore, it is only a few isolated statements made by Luther relatively early in his career that might seem to support the tension illustrated as follows: More than one casual observer has walked out of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Watertown (WELS) with the comment, "That sure looked like a Catholic church to me." There is something noticeably different about the interior of this particular church which the untrained eye has difficulty placing. St. Mark's is indeed a very ornate church. There is plenty there on which the appreciating eye can feast in every direction. It is particularly the altar which inevitably draws ones attention. However, St. Mark's has a decidedly Lutheran heritage. The answer to the question, "Then why does it look the way it does?" lies in this congregations consistent dedication to Christian symbolism.

St. Mark's sister congregation listened to the counsel of modern (economically-minded) church decorators, and has white-washed their own long traditon of symbolisms in their own

interior. The care-takers of St. Mark's however persistently rejected such advise, though heard again and again through several remodelling projects.

The symbols represented on her walls are not self-chosen. They are symbols such as were drawn in the sand and painted on cave walls by the earliest persecuted Christians--symbols which blossomed up to the time of the Reformation, survived the iconoclast controversies and symbols which were interpreted and refined through successive periods of artistic history. The premise of this paper is this: the Christian symbolism which is preserved in a traditional Lutheran Church, is for the lay person his most vital, viable link with Church History. Thus, symbols don't only have a devotional value in that they help to remind us of the Christian faith and create an atmosphere of worship. Further, their value isn't merely educational, namely that they aid both children and adults in approaching the basic ideas of Christianity. Symbols are perhaps the most practical aspect of Church History as it effects the ongoing life of a local congregation.

St. Mark's Lutheran Church of Watertown looks the way it does because the Christian people that make up her unique history were interested in preserving it's Christian heritage. They wanted to enter church on Sunday morning to see the same pictures Jesus painted for his disciples with words--the same pictures believers have associated with worship and their personal identification as Christians for centuries. Our link with Christian of the ages is not only through liturgy and hymn

singing, but it is also visible to the eye.

Don't get me wrong, Church History is itself an important PRACTICAL discipline because the doctrine and practice of a church inevitably springs from its history. Orthodoxy springs directly from the Bible record itself, whereas heterodoxy (and the false practices that accompany) arise from more recent historical interpretations and developments. Yet Church History comes alive in a unique way as our beautiful church buildings preach the sermons that we have painted on our walls, placed on our altars, and even designed into our architecture. Let this presentation now focus on the practical use of our Christian heritage in symbols.

In focussing on the dedication to Christian symbolism in one particular Lutheran Church--St. Mark's, Watertown--this writer intends to provide an example of the study of, and subsequently, the use of the symbols that a parish pastor might incorporate with those symbols which exist in the church he serves. His appreciation for the Lutheran heritage in symbols will further effect the decisions he will face should he oversee a church building or remodelling program. What he learns of value concerning his own church's symbols will provide material for sermons, even an entire special service consisting of a guided tour of the symbols which grace his church. He may well be gratified by a congregations response to an informative Bible class on their particular symbols. Without a doubt he will have a similar presentation for his confirmation class every year.

Especially, if the concept of "church-home" is to be true and meaningful in a congregation's outreach, wouldn't it be

natural for a parish pastor to help a new or prospective member to appreciate the uniqueness of his particular "church-home" through that church's symbols? This could be carried out through an informal tour, or some type of brochure, the purposes being that the new member would truly feel at home, and that the existing symbols may teach precisely what they were intended to convey. Your church in all its symbolic beauty may well become the only church building a parishoner truly understands and appreciates--his "church-home!"

St. Mark's Lutheran Church of Watertown through and through demonstrates a dedication to our rich Christian heritage, as the following details indicate. The architect who designed St. Mark's church in Watertown was A. Allison of Milwaukee. The general contract was let to two members, John F. Dornfeld and Gustav Zemke. The Northwestern College Band accompanied the cornerstone laying on Pentecost Monday afternoon 1887. The total cost of the building, dedicated on September 9, 1888, was \$23,074.77.

We can indeed be grateful to the planners mentioned above, that our church is more than just a meeting hall for like-minded people. It is the "house of God," "the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17). Every part of the building has deep meaning, beginning with the cross-topped steeple pointing to heaven reminding us of our one true goal and the only way to achieve it. The bells which calls the worshippers has the simple inscription, "Soli Deo Gloria." The building faces East in the direction of the rising sun, significant of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, who has

risen from the dead. At this east end is the heart of the church--the Baptismal Font, the Pulpit and the Altar.

The Baptismal Font is made of marble. It was the work of a member, Albert Kringel, who engraved the words, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me." The Lutheran emphasis on the Word is evident by the prominence of the pulpit, raised and extremely ornate with a beautiful Gothic canopy (Schalldeckel) to aid acoustics. However, it is the altar of St. Mark's Church which draws the most attention, with its ornate background and exquisite detail in rich Gothic style. The altar seems to have been built by a millwright whose place of business was on Western Avenue. The statue of Christ above the altar where all eyes meet, was supposedly done by a 14-year-old boy in Hustiford!

The statues of St. Paul and St. Mark on the altar represent the two New Testament witnesses unto Christ. The reredo by Prof. F.W.A. Notz depicts the boy Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem. Another is a 1953 nativity painting by John Colt, a Madison artist. This was a gift from Prof. Ralph Gerke of Northeastern College.

I was unable to find any record of the extent of the first remodelling, except that it took place in 1908, and the work at that time was done with calcimine, or, water paint--apparently a method subject to fading and soiling.

The cost of symbols at St. Mark's exceeded measure during the redecorating project of 1948, forty years after the first. When the symbols were being painted near the ceiling, a workman fell from the scaffolding to his death.

Proposals for this project were received from several firms,

but finally the nod went to a large firm with several crews, G. H. Shanbacher & Son of Springfield, Ill. This one firm had redecorated over two hundred churches that year, and had been in business for over sixty years. The 1949 renovation cost a very large sum--\$54,237.69. Of that sum, \$7255.00 went solely for the cost of preserving St. Mark's symbolic history. The total bill was paid up upon completion of the project.

In the most recent redecoration project, 1970-71, the firm doing the work was at first insistent that because of the scaffolding which filled the entire church, the congregation must worship elsewhere for about two months. The decorators were finally persuaded that the congregation be allowed to worship under the scaffolding, almost in the dark (this is clear in the writer's memory), and worshipped their Lord in eager anticipation of the time when the scaffolding could be removed and they would see their church in all its new beauty.

As I alluded earlier, the six redecorating firms that were interviewed were almost unanimously in favor of eliminating or at least cutting down drastically on the symbols and emblems in the church. This the congregation successfully resisted. So happy were the members of the congregation with the results, that the cost of the renovation, about \$175,000, including the new narthex, was totally met in less than two years. Added along with the new narthex, were emblems of the four evangelists seen in the windows above the four doorways, and a large new window, an original design by the architect, with numerous symbols depicting the Trinity, the Means of Grace, prayer, etc. Here follows a

sample of the type of introduction to a church's own symbols which may prove beneficial:

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A SERMON IN SYMBOLS AT ST. MARK'S  
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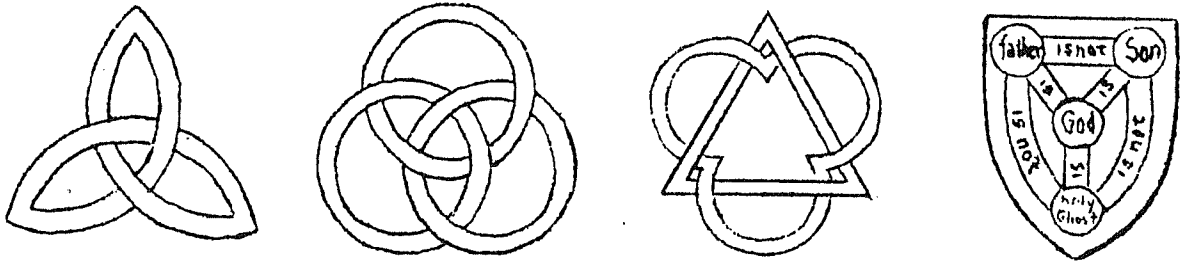
There is a silent sermon preached to your eyes in St. Mark's every time you enter--a sermon in symbols. Symbols are not just decorations. They are familiar objects used to express some truth or idea. They express deep and marvelous truths of Scripture in clear and simple ways. They also create an atmosphere of worship and provide food for thought even before the organ begins playing. They preach to you the truths of salvation, and they do so very effectively, for sometimes "one picture is worth a thousand words."

The sermon of the Christian symbols is as meaningless as a sermon in a foreign language until you come to understand a little about these symbols and what they represent. On these sheets we want to bring you a key to at least a few of the symbols in St. Mark's so that the sermon won't be lost on you, but rather, speak volumes of truth and comfort and peace and hope to you every time you see them. We can list only a brief sampling of them, because our church is so rich in symbols, but these can serve as a stepping-stone for you, a kind of introduction to the sermon of the symbols which you can then explore and examine for yourselves Sunday after Sunday. May God bless the message which these symbols proclaim to you.

I. SYMBOLS OF THE HOLY TRINITY. You will see the triangle in many places and forms as an attempt to express the fact that there are three persons, Father, Son and Holy



Spirit, but only one God. Equally familiar is the circle, often used with the triangle, to express the fact that God is eternal,--without beginning or end; or you may have three inter-woven circles. Some examples of symbols for the Trinity.



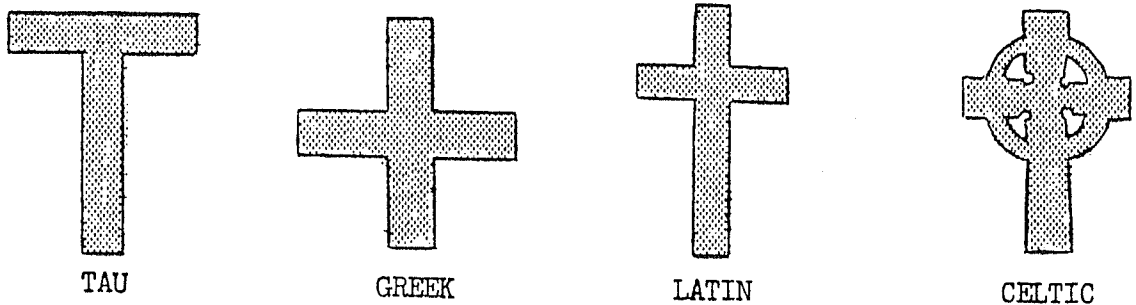
II. SYMBOLS OF THE FATHER, THE CREATOR:



III. SYMBOLS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:



IV. SYMBOLS OF THE SON, THE REDEEMER AND KING: There is hardly an end to his symbols, including dozens referring to the Passion story (such as the crown of thorns, the dice, the cock, the money bag of Judas, the whip, etc.) Most frequently used is the eloquent symbol of the cross, found in many different forms and shapes:



TAU

GREEK

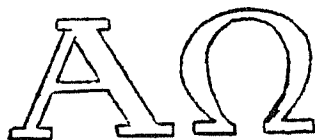
LATIN

CELTIC

Other symbols for the Son of God may not be quite as familiar. There is the Chi Rho symbol, the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ:



Another symbol for Christ is what looks to us like IHC, which again is an abbreviation of the name Jesus--a symbol in use for over 16 centuries. On your altar, you also see the Alpha



and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, reminding us that Jesus is the beginning and the end, the same yesterday, today, and forever. You have often noticed also the

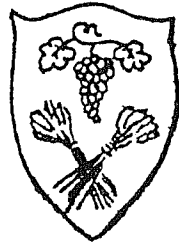
letters INRI, reminding us of "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jew," Pilate's inscription on the cross.

Another interesting symbol for Christ is found in the narthex of your church, the fish symbol. The letters of the Greek word for fish (ΙΧΘΥΣ), happen to be the initial letters of these words in Greek, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. In days when it was deadly dangerous to be a Christian, the followers of Jesus would identify themselves as such by making a sign of the fish, perhaps with a stick in the sand. A fellow-believer would know what it meant. The sign of the fish also would be used as a kind of arrow in the caves, or forests to point people to the meeting place of Christians.

The church literally abounds in other symbols, which you can now discover for yourself, having learned something about the language of symbolism. Notice your unusual altar candelabra indicating the Trinity. See the bread and wine symbols on the altar, also the grapes and grain symbols in the side borders, under the windows. Notice the Luther emblem under the hymn board, also his coat of arms containing such symbols as the cross, the

circle, and the Messianic Rose. Find the many different kinds of crosses proclaiming the Savior's suffering and salvation. Look for the symbols of the Trinity in the large narthex window, also the Means of Grace found there (the Word and both of the Sacraments), as well as the symbol for prayer in the upper lefthand corner.

Symbol  
of  
Holy  
Communion



Symbol  
of  
Prayer

Finally, we would like to introduce you to the symbols and emblems representiung the evangelists and apostles of the Lord. In the windows above the narthex doors, we find Matthew, a man with wings because he emphasized Jesus as True Man; Mark, symbolized by the lion, the king of beast, because he liked to stress the power and miracles of Jesus; Luke, the winged ox, symbolizing the sacrifice of our Savior, (the ox was the biggest sacrifice made in the temple, and is here given wings to show that Jesus was a heavenly sacrifice; John, the eagle, symbolizing the heights of revelation.



We direct your eyes to the emblems near the ceiling of your church. (Note that there are many variations of these emblems.)

Paul: the sword of the Spirit and the Bible.

Matthew: the familiar three money bags.

Philip: the cross and basket of loaves, because of his reply to Jesus in John 6.

Bartholomew: symbolized by a knife, indicating the terrible death he died in loyalty to Jesus.

John: the serpent rising out of the cup points to the attempt on his life by putting poison into his communion cup.

James the Minor: a saw, indicating the way he died as a martyr, sawn in two.

Jude: the ship on which he carried the Gospel.

Thomas: the carpenter's square, because he is said to have built a church with his own hands: also indicating his death.

Andrew: an X-shaped cross on which he is said to have died; also the fish hook as a fisher of men.

James: cross and the shell (shell used by travelers to dip water out of springs), indicating his travels for the Gospel.

Peter: crossed keys and the inverted cross on which tradition says he was put to death, by his demand.

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The purpose of this paper has not been to catalog and define all or even a representative listing of Lutheran and Christian symbols. That work has been done exhaustively by various authors. However, in closing I would like to mention a couple of the most helpful efforts of this kind, which will be extremely valuable for a parish pastor in researching the symbols he inherits, and especially in any church building or remodelling project.

Adelbert Kretzmann, a former instructor in Church Art at Concordia Teachers College in River Forest, Illinois, has probably made the single most practical contribution in this area: "Symbols--A Practical Handbook." He lists perhaps the 125

most common Lutheran symbols, with a precise description, appropriate Scripture references, "The Lutheran Hymnal" references, and proper colors for each.

Excellent for instructional purposes <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ the four-color card packet, furnished by Lutheran Brotherhood, "Symbols of the Lutheran Church," and "Symbols of the Apostles and the Evangelists."

Numerous pamphlets, as well as larger books, are also available, mentioned in my bibliography, which go into greater detail on the background and meaning of the various symbols, than does Kretzmann.

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