



Symbols of the Early Church

Uncovering signs of faith

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states “In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God.” (CCC 1146)

Found in ancient catacombs and art, the early Church developed a series of secret symbols to identify christians. These are not mere illustrations but rather signs of faith that served as monograms for the early christians.

The comparison chart explores four symbols used by the early christian communities.

Sources: *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Church POP, Biblical Archaeology Society*

ABOVE:
Image of a fresco found in the crypt of St. Agnes in Agony located in Rome, Italy.

Symbol	Meaning	Use in Early Church	Scriptural References	Tradition
Ichthys 	Greek acronym for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” (Greek: ΙΧΘΥΣ). Symbol of Christ and Christian identity.	Used as a secret sign among persecuted Christians. Found in catacombs and early Christian art.	“I will make you fishers of men.” <i>Matthew 4:19</i>	Remains a Christian symbol, seen on cars, jewelry, and liturgical art.
Chi-Rho 	Composed of the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ: <i>Christos</i> . Symbol of Christ’s victory over sin and death.	Common in early Christian and Byzantine art.	“At the name of Jesus every knee should bend.” <i>Philippians 2:9-11</i>	Found in Catholic liturgical decorations, vestments, and sacred vessels. Represents Christ’s kingship and divinity.
Staurogram 	Symbol of Christ’s crucifixion and redemption. The capital letters tau (τ) and rho (ρ) represent the Greek word for crucify: <i>stauros</i> .	The cross was used discreetly in forms like the staurogram.	“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us ... it is the power of God.” <i>1 Corinthians 1:18</i>	Christian symbol used in worship, sacraments, and devotion. (CCC 618)
Anchor 	Symbol of hope and steadfast faith in God. Represents security in Christ.	Used on Christian tombs in the Roman catacombs as a hidden Christian symbol.	“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” <i>Hebrews 6:19</i>	Still used in Christian art and jewelry. Represents trust in God’s promises and eternal salvation. (CCC 1817)