

Symbols and Gestures in the Catholic Faith

Since the earliest times, the concept of symbolism has appeared in every human culture, social structure and religious system. Signs and symbols are concrete actions and objects that point to spiritual realities, they act as badges of faith, teaching tools and aids on the journey towards a greater understanding and participation in our Catholic Faith. Below are a few of the more popular Christians symbols and their significance in our Catholic Identity.

1. CRUCIFIX



The crucifix is a Cross with the figure of the body of Jesus Christ attached to it. This is a very common Catholic symbol. It is placed on or above the altar where the Eucharist is celebrated. A crucifix is a symbol of sacrifice.

5. CHI RHO



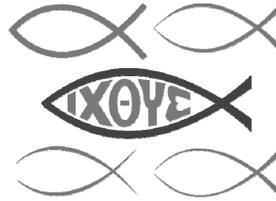
The first two letters of Christ's name in Greek are *X* and *P*. Also known as the *chi-rho* cross, the letters are usually inscribed one over the other.

2. ALPHA AND OMEGA



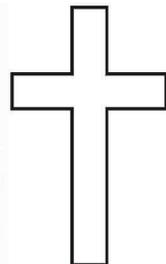
These are the 1st and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Christ refers to himself as the Alpha and Omega, that is the first and the last. Christ is the beginning and the end of all creation. These symbols are used at various times in the year.

6. THE FISH or ICHTHUS



One of the oldest Christian symbols is the fish or *ichthys*. It was used by Christians to identify themselves in times of persecution. In Greek, *ichthys*, (*ΙΧΘΥΣ*) acts as a monogram for the first 5 letters of the words, "Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior".

3. THE CROSS



Found wherever there is a Christian presence, the cross preserves the fundamental belief that Jesus died and rose again. As such it is a sign of victory over death. After Christianity became legal it become one of the most popular symbols of Christ.

7. THE DOVE



The dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. When Christ was baptized by John the Baptist, a dove descended on him. The dove is sometimes depicted with an olive branch as a symbol of peace. It also symbolizes God's grace.

4. THE SACRED HEART



The Sacred Heart is a symbol of the love of Jesus for all humanity. His heart is shown pierced with a cross and crown of thorns recalling his sacrifice for us. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus first began in the late 17th century.

8. THE LAMB



One of the most important symbols of Christ is the Lamb. The lamb symbolizes innocence and purity. Lambs were used for sacrifice and Christ, the sacrificial lamb, died for the sins of humanity.

9. ASHES



Ashes are an ancient sign of penance. We place ashes on our forehead at the beginning of Lent as an outward sign of our need for repentance. Ashes mark the start of 40 days of prayer, fasting and almsgiving in which we recall God's love for us, repent of our sins and offer sacrifice with Christ so as to share in his victory over death.

10. INCENSE



Incense symbolizes prayers rising to heaven. It is also used to bless and to purify. Frankincense is one of the gifts traditionally associated with the Magi.

11. MONSTRANCE



A monstrance, the root of which means *to show*, is a vessel used to display an important object for all to see. Most commonly used to display a consecrated host during Eucharistic Adoration, it is also used to display relics. Monstrances are often very ornate to show reverence for Christ present in the host.

The Catholic Faith has a long and rich heritage of using symbols and gestures to convey spiritual meaning and purpose.

Part of understanding and living our Catholic identity comes from learning the many symbols and gestures that express our beliefs.

Symbols and Gestures help us live our faith through everyday thoughts and actions witnessing the truths of Christ in all we say and do.

Gestures

BOWING—Bowling is a sign of humility and respect for God's presence. Adapted from Roman court traditions, bowing continues to play a part in various Church Liturgy's including the Mass and Liturgy of the Hours. Bowing is done in place of genuflecting when approaching the altar.

GENUFLECTION—The definition is "to bend the knee". Catholics genuflect before entering a pew as a greeting and sign of respect for Christ, present in the Eucharist. If the Church has moved the Tabernacle to a side altar or special chapel only a bow is necessary when entering the pew, to acknowledge the altar where Christ is sacrificed.

SIGN OF THE CROSS—The sign of the Cross is used as a blessing. The spoken formula recalls our belief in the Trinitarian God and its shape, "a cross" recalls Christ's victory over death. When making the sign of the cross we should reaffirm our baptismal faith and commitment to living a life in union with Christ.

USING HOLY WATER— We use holy water as we enter Church to recall our baptism and an act of purifying ourselves before approaching the presence of God. We cross ourselves when we use holy water to remind ourselves that in our baptism we have died with Christ and with him have become new creations. Holy water is a sacramental.