

# our christian symbols



The Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to make an offering to me. Receive whatever offerings anyone wishes to give. These offerings are to be: gold, silver and bronze; fine linen; blue, purple, and red wool; cloth made of goats’ hair; rams’ skin dyed red; fine leather; acacia wood; oil for the lamps; spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet-smelling incense; carnelians and other jewels to be set in the ephod of the High Priest and in his breast piece. The people must make a sacred Tent for me, so that I may live among them. Make it and all its furnishings according to the plan that I will show you.

—EXODUS 25:1-9

Life is surrounded by and only made possible by symbols and symbolism, from the world of advertising to quantum physics and the various grades of mathematics. More obvious even still is the human language. **All words are symbols.** It’s what they stand for and the power they represent and convey that’s so important. Life is virtually impossible without them.

Throughout church history, symbols have been used to **aid in worship and to communicate difficult spiritual ideas.** In the earliest days of the church, during times of persecution, they were **secret signs** among the faithful. Many early Christians did not read, so symbols acted as a **teaching tool of biblical truths.** Today, these symbols act to connect us to our faith tradition, as it has been passed down for thousands of years.

As you begin studying the symbols of the Christian faith it is important to know that these **symbols are constantly changing.** Many of the symbols were not Christian in origin but were re-adapted for Christian use. Even today, many of the early Christian symbols are no longer identified as Christian anymore. Always keep in mind that symbols are meant to **make a concrete statement about the faith quickly and effectively without the use of words.**

The truth is that **symbols, metaphors, and allegories define our reality.** Think about it. A wedding ring is in and of itself merely a circle of precious metal, but it’s a symbol of a potent reality. It is not of itself love, commitment, fidelity, marriage, or family, but it can powerfully represent all of these and more. The commitment and what it represents far exceeds its commercial value or beauty.

## GUIDED TOUR



### *The Cross*

The Cross is the most universal Christian symbol, found in many forms:



#### **CALVARY CROSS:**

The three steps represent the hill of Calvary or, more often, faith, hope and love.



#### **TRINITY CROSS:**

The trefoil end-caps on the arms of the cross call to mind the Trinity.



#### **JERUSALEM**

**CROSS:** A symbol of the crusades, the cross is formed of four smaller crosses representing the spreading of the gospel to the four corners of the earth.



**ALMS BASIN.** A large plate, usually of metal, in which is placed the offerings of the worshippers, for presentation at the altar.

**ALTAR RAIL.** The railing that encloses the sanctuary surrounding the altar at which communicants kneel to receive the bread and wine during the Eucharist or a blessing during healing.

**AUMBRY.** Holding the reserved sacrament, this receptacle is either affixed to a wall or sits on a shelf apart from the altar. Chrism and oil may also be kept in an aumbry separate from the one used for the sacrament.

**BAPTISTRY.** Wherever the baptismal font is located. It may be near the entrance to the church, in a side chapel or in a separate building.

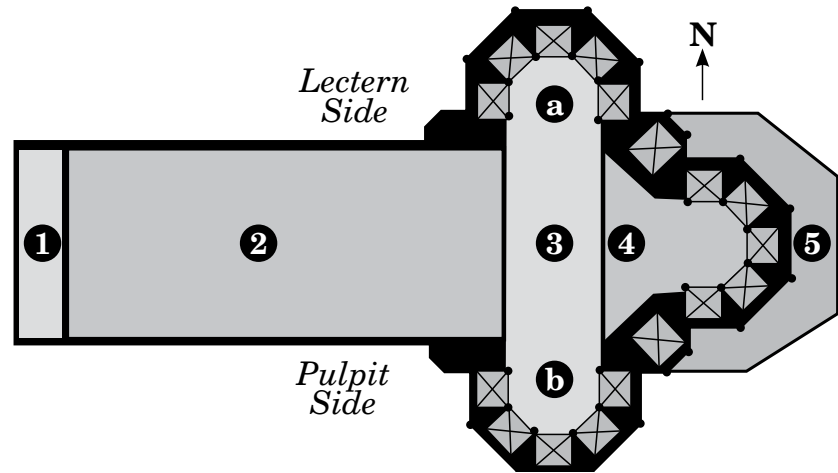
**CIBORIUM.** A covered chalice or box, usually of silver, to contain the bread for Holy Communion.

**CREDENCE TABLE.** Made of wood or stone, this table sits at the side of the Sanctuary and holds the elements of the Holy Communion before their consecration.

**CRUETS.** For the use of the priest in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, two bottles, holding unconsecrated water and wine, are placed on the credence table.

**DOSSAL.** From the Latin word for "back," it is a cloth (silk or tapestry) hung above and behind the altar.

**Cruciform Church Plan.** Planned in the shape of the cross, the church building, like everything else, is created out of symbols. The roof symbolizes charity; the floor symbolizes the foundation of faith and the humility of the poor; the columns represent the Apostles, Bishops, and Doctors; the vaulting represents the preachers who hold up humankind toward heaven; and the beams represent those who used a sword to defend their faith. The front of the church always points East, representing the Heavenly Jerusalem, and where the Messiah will return in glory; West represents death and evil.



**1. narthex.** The "entry" or "foyer" of the church. Originally, those who had yet been baptized or confirmed remained here.

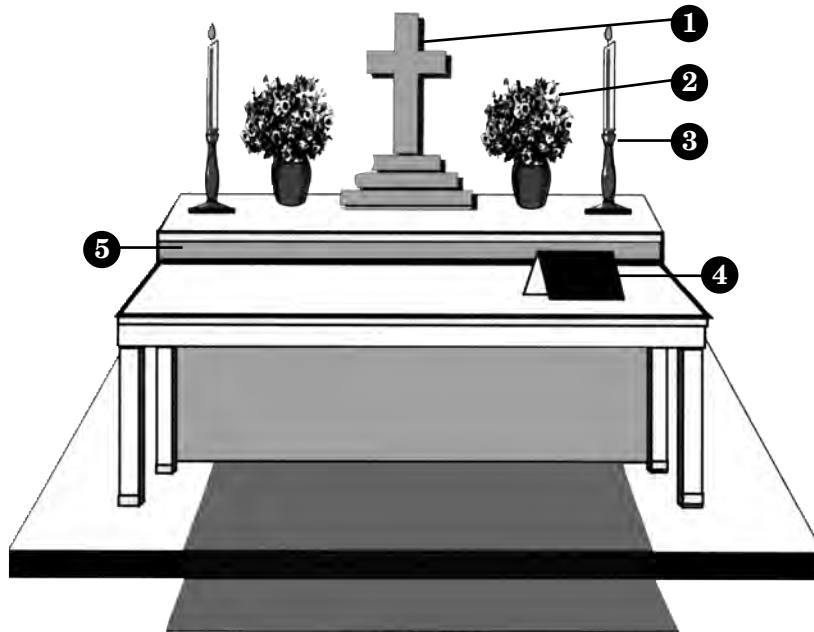
**2. nave.** Referring to the "barque of Peter" and "Noah's Ark," the word "nave" is derived from the Latin word for ship, *navis*, and has come to mean the area where the parishioners sit or stand. In Gothic architecture, the nave had an aisle (or two) on both sides.

**3. transept.** The two wings of the church, representing the arms of the cross and usually intersecting the nave at the foot of the chancel, at what, in architecture, is called the crossing. (a) North Transept; (b) South Transept

**4. chancel.** This chancel contains the sanctuary (the holy place behind the altar rail where the high altar sits) and the choir. It is usually raised by steps above the nave of the church and can be separated by a screen of lattice work, *cancelli*, or a beam bearing a rood (cross).

**5. sacristy.** From the Latin *sacra* (sacred things), this is the room in the church building where the vestments, sacred books and vessels are kept.

**altar.** A table made usually of wood or stone, upon which the Communion or Holy Eucharist is consecrated. The altar is placed in the sanctuary at the end of the chancel facing the congregation. The raised altar symbolizes Christ's suffering on the mount. Wood suggests the cross of Christ; stone the rock of Calvary.



**1. altar cross.** The cross, usually made of brass, wood, or of some precious metal, sits upon the altar or is suspended above the altar.

**2. flowers.** These are symbols of life. For Christians, they are reminders of the new life received in Christ's resurrection.

**3. candles.** All candles tell us that Christ is the light of the world. Eucharistic candles (two) symbolize the two natures of Christ— human and divine.

**4. Missal Stand.** The stand that holds the missal (from the Latin *missa*, for Mass, the book containing the communion service and the prayers of the people). When not in use, it is placed on the credence table.

**5. retable.** The altar consists of two parts; the priest stands between them and faces the congregation. The retable is a shelf at the rear of the altar on which is placed the cross, flowers and candlesticks.

## GUIDED TOUR



**EWER.** A pitcher, usually of silver or brass, for the water to be used in Holy Baptism.

**FLAGON.** A pitcher-shaped vessel, usually of silver or pewter, to hold the unconsecrated wine before it is consecrated in the chalice.

**HOST.** From Latin *hostia* (victim), this refers to the consecrated bread or wafer of holy Communion.

**LAVABO.** Meaning *I will wash*, this is the ceremonial washing of the celebrant's hands before the consecration, usually at the Offertory; the bowl used for the water.

**LECTERN.** The stand on the right side of the church as you face the altar (the "Epistle side") where the lessons and prayers are read (traditionally the side which can be used by lay people).

**MENSA.** From the Latin for table, this is the slab of stone used as the top of the altar.

**ORPHREY.** An embroidered or decorative band on an ecclesiastical vestment or hanging.

**PALL.** In addition to being placed on the chalice during Holy Eucharist, it is a cloth, usually white or purple, spread over a casket at a funeral.

**PRIE-DIEU.** From French for "pray God," a small desk with a footpiece on which to kneel, used for both public worship in a church and private devotions in a chapel.

**PROCESSIONAL CROSS.** A cross of wood or brass attached to a wood pole and carried in front of the procession.

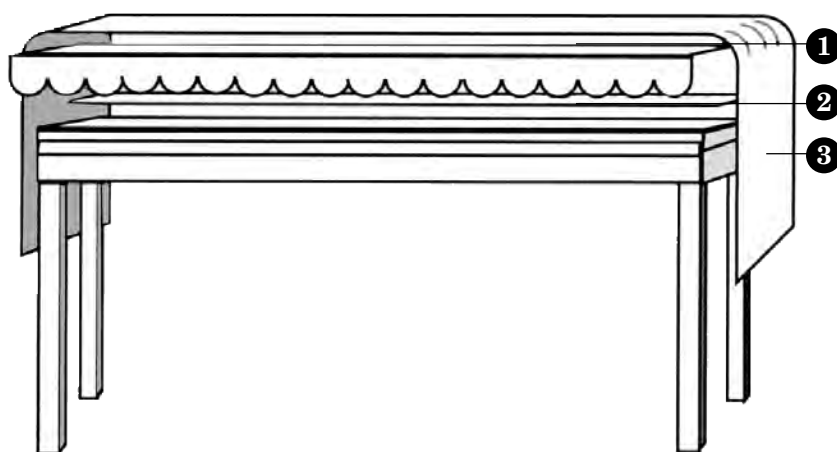


**PULPIT.** The podium on the left side of the church as you face the Altar (the “Gospel side”), from where the Gospel originally was read (traditionally reserved for clergy) and the sermon is preached.

**TABERNACLE.** A box or receptacle for the reserved sacrament, located on the altar.

**WAFER.** A small, flat disk of unleavened bread, usually stamped with a cross, or the letters IHS, or a crown of thorns, nails, etc., and is used in most congregations for the bread of the Holy Eucharist, the host.

**altar linen.** Pieces of linen used to cover the altar and the Communion vessels during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.



**1. super-frontal.** A piece of material, usually of silk or lace, that covers the top of the altar and hangs down in front eight or ten inches over the frontal. If it is of silk, the color varies with the church season.

**2. cerecloth.** This is the first cloth that covers the altar and lies under the fair white linen. It should be waxed and just the length and breadth of the altar. Its primary purpose is to keep the stone or marble tops of altars from “sweating through” to the fair white linen. The name and symbolism are derived from the waxed cloth used to wrap a dead body.

**3. fair white linen cloth.** The long linen cloth covering the top of the altar and hanging over the ends. It is embroidered with five crosses symbolic of Jesus’ wounded body at his burial.

**4. Chalice veil.** The embroidered silk covering for the Communion vessels, usually the color of the church season. It represents the cloth wrapped around Jesus’ head at his burial.

**5. priest’s host.** A single large host (wafer) is used during the consecration prayer. The priest holds the wafer up before the congregation as the bread is blessed.

**6. purificator.** A small linen napkin placed over the chalice before the consecration prayer and used to wipe or cleanse the chalice.



## Church Customs

1. When you arrive at church, enter and go directly to your pew. Kneel to pray.
2. Before the service begins, quietly prepare yourself for worship by reading from the prayer book or Bible or Hymnal.
3. Whenever you pass by the front of the altar, pause and bow your head in respect for God.
4. Some people bow their heads as the processional cross goes by the pew where they are standing.
5. Some people bow their heads when the name of Jesus Christ is said in the Creed. This custom is an act of respect, like saluting the flag.
6. We stand to praise. We sit for instruction. We stand or kneel to pray.
7. We say all the responses in the service so that we are an active participants, not spectators. By saying the Amen, "so be it," at the end of each prayer, we make even those prayers said only by the celebrant our own.
8. Only make the sign of the cross or other devotional acts if they are meaningful for you. These can be done at the beginning and end of prayers, the last phrase of the Creed, after receiving the Eucharist, during the Absolution prayer.
9. Before leaving church, kneel to thank God for worship.

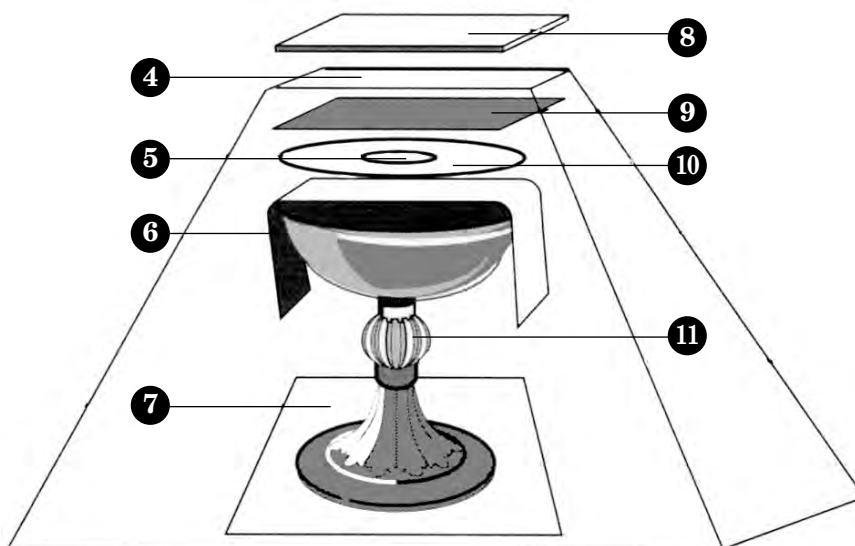
**7. corporal.** From the Latin corpus (body), this is a napkin of fine linen to be placed on the altar over the fair white linen cloth. The sacred vessels are placed on top of this at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. It is embroidered with one cross in front.

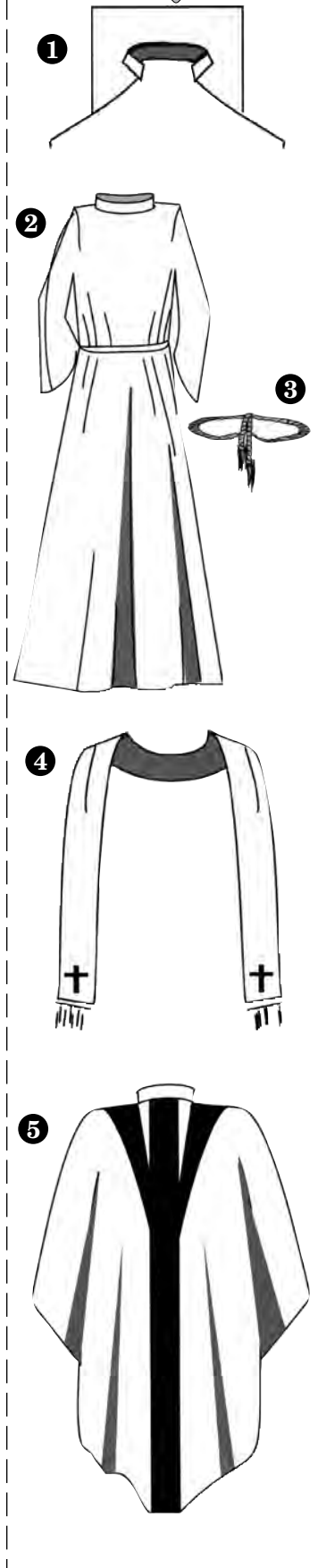
**8. burse.** The square pocket or purse that is made to contain the corporal, post-Communion veil and purificators. It is placed over the veiled chalice and paten on the altar before and after the celebration of the Holy Communion.

**9. pall.** A square piece of light board, metal or plastic covered with white linen, which is placed over the chalice at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

**10. paten.** A round flat plate, usually of silver, where the bread is placed for consecration during the Holy Eucharist. The priest or Eucharistic minister serves the wafers or bread from the paten during Communion.

**11. chalice.** The chalice, or cup, usually silver or ceramic, holds the consecrated wine during the Holy Eucharist service.





**vestments.** The garments worn by the clergy and all who assist in services. The distinctive robes are in respect for worship of God and also provide a uniform appearance.

**1. amice.** Symbolizing the helmet of salvation, the amice is a rectangular piece of white linen with two strings at the upper corners which a cleric uses underneath his alb to cover the neck so that the Roman collar of the cassock is hidden. The word amice comes from the Latin *amicire*, meaning “to cover” and, because the heads of criminals condemned to death were covered in linen, the amice recalls the humiliation which was put upon Christ.

**2. alb.** A white linen garment that covers the entire body, from shoulders to ankles, worn by those priests who celebrate the Holy Communion in Eucharistic vestments, and sometimes also by those who serve them at the altar. Its whiteness symbolizes purity. (The alb is said to be an ancient baptismal garment and comes from the Latin *alba* meaning white.)

**3. girdle.** The girdle is tied over the alb at the waist and stands for girding up to do the work of the Lord, reminding us of the scourging of Jesus by the Romans.

**4. stole.** From the Greek for “equipment, array,” this long band or scarf is worn during services by the clergy. A priest wears it around the neck with the ends hanging down in front. A deacon wears it over the left shoulder, tied under the right arm. It is usually made in the color of the church season and is embroidered with ecclesiastical symbols. It signifies the yoke of Christ.

**5. chausible.** A large-oval-shaped poncho-like garment of linen or silk, without sleeves but with a hole in the center to place over the head of the celebrant. Usually, it has orphreys, the one in the back forming a y-shaped cross. When made of silk, it usually conforms to the color of the church season. It may represent the royal robe the Roman soldiers placed on Jesus when they mocked him as “King of the Jews.”



**6. cassock and cotta.** Worn by acolytes, the choir and ministers, a cassock is an ankle length black or colored garment and a cotta is a white garment with sleeves that falls below the waist. The cotta is really a miniature alb. The custom of wearing cassock and cotta came from the Middle Age practice of wearing the alb over the basic garment of the time, the cassock. These vestments give a unified appearance to those assisting in the service.