

# Chapter 1



## Symbols - What Are They?

When asked to name a personal possession that had given her the most value for the money, the noted humorist Erma Bombeck replied:

*“I would have to say this about my wedding ring. For years it has done its job. It has led me not into temptation. It has reminded my husband numerous times at parties that it’s time to go home. It has been a source of relief to a dinner companion. It has been a status symbol in the maternity ward. It has reminded me every day of the last 30 years that I have someone who loves me.”*

---

### Autos as Symbols

---

Symbols play an important role in advertising, especially when it come to automobiles. Most people do not purchase an auto on the basis of its good engine but for psychological reasons. The car fulfills an inner need for power, for macho. Thus the car becomes a symbol that tells us much about the person who drives it. Some older drivers, for example, actually fear and stay out of the way of sleek sports cars. For them such a car is a symbol of reckless speed.

---

### *The Almighty is in the Dollar*

---

A rare coin dealer pointed out once how much of the Almighty is in the “almighty” dollar. If you would take out a dollar bill and look at it, you will observe the following points. There are two circles representing both sides of the Great Seal of the United States. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams spent six years designing the seal which was approved by Congress on June 20, 1782. The pyramid in the left circle represents material strength and endurance. Its unfinished top signifies that there’s more work to be done. The all-seeing “Eye of God” on top of the pyramid emphasized the reign and supremacy of God over the material things in the universe. He comes first; material things second. The Founding Fathers thus expressed their faith that our strength is rooted in God, and all that we do with our money and life is under His watchful eye.

The words *Annuit Coeptis* that circle the top of the seal mean, “God has favored our undertaking.” The other three Latin words under the pyramid, “*Novus Ordo Seclorum*,” meaning “a new order of things,” express the freedom of the American people to practice self-government. The Roman numerals at the base of the pyramid remind us of our nation’s birth date: 1776.

If you will now look at the right hand circle you will see the eagle, a symbol of strength and victory, which was selected as our national symbol in 1782. The shield on its breast signifies self-reliance and contains thirteen stripes for the thirteen states. It holds an olive branch on one talon with thirteen leaves, symbolizing peace. On its other talon it holds a bundle of thirteen arrows, symbolizing protection and power. Above the eagle’s head is a ring of light surrounding thirteen stars. This symbolizes a new nation taking its place among the sovereign powers of the world. Thus, we see that the “almighty” dollar actually does have a lot of the Almighty God in it. It is a beautiful symbol of what this great nation stands for. The words “In God We Trust” are not empty words. Our nation has been founded on them. All of this is represented on the dollar bill which turns out to be quite a powerful symbol of what America stands for.

---

*Saying Hello to God*

---

Glen Kittler tells the following charming story concerning the practice of tipping one's hat as one passes a church.

"While I was going to college, I had a summer job in a Chicago bank where I became close friends with one of my co-workers. He was Protestant and I was Catholic.

One day as we were traveling by bus to his home for dinner, we passed a large church.

'Watch all the Catholic men in the bus tip their hats,' I whispered to him.

Sure enough, as the bus rumbled past the church, people throughout the bus tipped their hats. Some of them without even looking up from their newspapers.

My Protestant friend asked, 'Why do they do that?'

I answered, 'It's just a way of saying hello to God.'

After we reached our stop, we had a few blocks to walk before coming to my friend's house. As we approached a church, my friend pointed toward it and said, 'Here's where I go to church. Do we say hello?'

'Of course we do,' I replied—and we tipped our hats.

In the same block there was a building that, judging from the Star of David on the door, was a synagogue. Neither my friend or I said a word. We simply tipped our hats.'

Tipping one's hat as one passes a house of worship is a reverent and beautiful symbol of one's devotion and respect for God.

---

*The Auca Indians*

---

Some years ago the Auca Indians in South America killed five American missionaries who had landed in their midst to preach the Gospel. They landed on a sand strip and tried to show the Indians in every way they knew that they were friendly. One of the missionaries put his arm around an Auca man, a gesture which to a Westerner cannot be understood in any other way than friendliness. Years later it was learned from the Aucas themselves that they had taken this to be proof of the foreigner's being a cannibal. What to us was a symbol of friendship, to them was a symbol of cannibalism and resulted in the killing of five missionaries. If they had known the deadly meaning to the Aucas of that innocent

symbol, it would have saved their lives. Symbols! Who can deny their importance?

Solzhenitsyn writes about the old domed churches that everywhere dot the countryside in the Soviet Union. They stand, he says, as beautiful symbols of God's presence in an officially Godless nation that treats its men and women like animals.

---

### *What is A Symbol*

---

Symbols! What are they?

The word symbol is derived from two Greek words *syn* and *balo* which means to bring two realities together and place them side by side.

Leonid Ouspensky, that brilliant expositor of the Orthodox language of symbolism, holds that it is necessary for us to distinguish between *sign* and *symbol*: "The sign limits itself to a particular fact," he writes, "the symbol expresses and somehow incorporates and makes present a higher reality. To understand a symbol is to experience a presence; to understand a sign is to translate a piece of information. Let us take the cross as an example. In arithmetic it is simply a sign which denotes addition. In the Highway Code it indicates a crossroads. But in religion it is a symbol which expresses and communicates the inexhaustible content of the Christian faith. Symbolism plays a very important role in the Church, because everything in the Church has, so to speak, a dual character: material and spiritual. The material is directly accessible to our senses; the spiritual is suggested to us through symbols."<sup>1</sup>

Avery Dulles defines a symbol as "an externally perceived sign that works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define. . . . The symbol is a sign pregnant with a depth of meaning which is evoked rather than explicitly stated."<sup>2</sup>

---

### *Reveal and Conceal*

---

Even so, symbols reveal at the same time as they hide. In the words of Leonid Ouspensky, "Symbolism, the language of mystery, reveals the truth to those who know how to interpret it, while concealing it from the uninitiated."<sup>2</sup> Thus, symbols both reveal and conceal. They never completely capture the reality which they

seek to express. There is always something left unsaid. This allows symbols to serve as the proper language for what Orthodox theology calls "mystery."

Through symbols God penetrates created things and reveals Himself to us through the channels of sense. As someone so well said, "All symbols function together in a trinitarian way, singing the thrice-holy hymn in their concretely expressive language."

---

### *The Need for Symbols*

---

Why do we need symbols?

Reporters once asked the famous choreographer, Martha Graham, "What does your dance mean?" She replied, "Darlings, if I could tell you, I would not have danced it." It has been said that the loftiest truths can only be communicated through symbols. As man cannot live by bread alone, so he cannot live by word alone. Something more than words is needed to help express the inexpressible.

The Orthodox Church has always used visible things to help make known to us the invisible realities that are beyond the reach of our senses. For, as St. John of Damascus says, "We are not able to bring ourselves to contemplate spiritual things without some intermediary, and in order to do this we need something close and familiar."

Symbols are carriers of meaning and tradition that speak to the whole person because they speak through the senses. We shall not need images and symbols in the kingdom, for then we shall see God face to face. But in the world where "we see in a glass darkly," symbols transmit rays of light that help penetrate the darkness.

---

### *Iconoclasm Today*

---

Margaret R. Miles of the Harvard Divinity School wants Protestants and others to recover the importance of images and symbols in worship. Their iconoclasm, she feels, went too far, especially for an age in which people think in terms of the visual and have only secular images on which to concentrate.

In the absence of religious symbols, she says, the secular symbols have taken over and are controlling our values and attitudes. She writes, "*Theoria*, contemplation in which one is lifted

out of one's familiar world and into the living presence of the spiritual world, begins with *physical* vision, with a trained and focused seeing that overcomes barriers between the visible and the spiritual world. Moreover, contemplation forms community. . . . We need, says someone named Arnheim, to 'understand through the eyes'' (Harvard Divinity School Bulletin).

Speaking to the issue of how some Protestant Christians abrogated the use of symbols, Weldon Hardenbrook, an Orthodox Evangelical, writes, "Even Martin Luther, who is called the Father of the Protestant Reformation, called on his flock to use the sign of the cross. . . . It was not until the Sixteenth Century, at the time of King James, that a small group of Puritans began writing and speaking against the use of the sign of the cross. . . . Today, many American Christians have been deceived . . . into being ashamed of embracing the glory of the cross upon their breast. But hungry for a way to physically express their allegiance to Christ, many of those who reject making the sign of the cross have ended up creating their own Christian hand signs."

He goes on to explain how the "Jesus Movement" invented the "one way" sign to express that Jesus is the only way to God. This sign consisted of the index finger pointing upward. But the sign did not last, he writes. "It wasn't orthodox; it wasn't the Church's sign. It wasn't the sign of the cross. The cross is not novel; it is the true sign that belongs to each Christian."<sup>3</sup>

---

### *Symbols Communicate Powerfully*

---

The smile of one small child tells more about joy than a whole book. The tears of a family by a graveside express grief in a way that frustrates words, however eloquent. The sight of a person on his knees speaks of faith in its fullness, beyond efforts to define.

A smile, a tear, a bodily posture, a photograph: each in its own way communicates immediately, powerfully, sensitively, significantly. Each is a symbol that is easily understandable, invested with the power to break through the barriers of language and abstraction and to communicate a greater reality. Mircea Eliade, chairman of the Department of History of Religions at the University of Chicago, writes in his book "The Sacred and the Profane" (Harvest Book): ". . . symbolism plays a decisive part in the

religious history of humanity; it is through symbols that the world becomes transparent, is able to show the transcendent.”

The Orthodox Church makes extensive use of symbols. Fr. George Maloney has written:

*“Symbols are man’s signposts that lead him into communication with the Divine. They are meta-rational signs of an interior world that is very real, but whose existence will always remain unknown unless human beings learn the importance of religious symbols. Carl G. Jung has pointed out that the impoverished West has lost the ability to live with myths and symbols. . . . From Eastern Christianity there is a new-felt influence upon Western Christians through the beautiful Byzantine icons, the Jesus Prayer and the haunting Liturgies so full of hieratic symbols that lead a worshiper into a deep experience of God through vivid sense impressions. . . .”<sup>4</sup>*

---

### **Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata”**

---

An example of how symbols help express what simple words cannot is an incident taken from the life of Beethoven. He had a friend, a baroness, who was desolate from the death of her only child. Beethoven was so close to the family that he felt the loss personally and shared it as his own. When he visited his friend after the funeral, he could find no word of comfort to speak for he had no word of comfort to say. He went to the piano and started to play a melody we now know as “The Moonlight Sonata.” Even in the darkest night, he was trying to express the thought that there is harmony and life if we are sensitive enough to appreciate and hear. Afterward the baroness said, “He told me everything I needed to know.”

What could not be expressed with words was expressed through music.

---

### **Radical Christian Materialists**

---

Dr. Anthony Ugolnik has written,

*“The Orthodox could better be understood . . . as radical Christian materialists. We perceive God as immanent in His Creation, as inherent in the material*

*world; our symbolism continually calls that immanence to mind. . . . For all our mysticism, we Orthodox are shockingly 'material,' as many of our Puritan detractors have noted, in our expression of faith. We engage all the senses in worship. With the sacraments as our model, we continually draw a connection between a given 'thing' and what it 'signifies.' . . . Thinkers like the religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev can see the whole of the material world as charged with Divinity, with Christ as the Ultimate Theophany in a series of theophanies. This Christ is the fullest expression of God's immanence in His Creation. . . . Our rites of observance—veneration of icons, vigil lights, blessings—these liberate material objects from secular autonomy and restore their relationship within the scheme of Creation. . . . We take the Christian artist absolutely seriously as a theologian. The iconographer, the musician, the poet and hymnographer, and no less the novelist—each of these manipulates a material medium, sanctifies it, and restores it to his or her God.'<sup>5</sup>*

---

### **On Dis-Incarnating Christianity**

---

The Greek Orthodox theologian, Dr. Nikos Nissiotis, clarifies the use of symbols in the Orthodox Church:

*"Ikons and liturgical gestures and actions are a legitimate use of nature which in an eschatological perspective is already restored, in order that the worshipping community may receive the real presence of the Lord coming in His Glory. None of these symbolic elements is an end in itself. None is presented as a sine qua non condition. Matter and colours and movements and the set forms of an ecclesiastical life are transparent facades set forth in front of the eyes of the faithful by which to look through to the hidden spiritual realities of the celestial world. There is, therefore, no question of the worship of Ikons or of a superstitious reverence for sacred objects, but rather of respect for every object which is used by the pray-*

*ing community as material selected out of the Creation of God, in order to render His glory more immediately present around the eucharist which is thus seen as the omnipotent centre of all worship.*

*“The absence of symbolism in Christian worship is not simply an absence of a secondary item in the Christian life; rather it denotes a dangerous inclination to dis-incarnate the whole content of Christian faith and to arrive at a kind of spiritualistic monism. One must see the Orthodox community as grounded precisely on this ‘materialism’ of worship, and blended in and with this saved world. A worshipping community prays and offers not only its own gifts, and its own prayer, but the whole creation and the whole world with all its problems, though in a doxological and hymnological way.”<sup>6</sup>*

Leonid Ouspensky adds: “. . . in the primitive churches, just as in ours today, everything has a symbolic meaning, everything was designed to lift up the soul and spirit of man to the divine life. In other words, the very architecture of the churches, lifts us up to contemplate realities which are not only invisible but which also cannot be expressed directly. The objects that our bodily eyes behold thus become symbols which introduce us to the divine world. This is an application of the patristic formula: visible objects lift us up to the contemplation of invisible things.”<sup>7</sup>

---

### *Purpose of Symbols*

---

Fr. Thomas Hopko describes the purpose of symbols when he writes:

*This, after all, is what Thomas Merton’s ‘gold-encrusted cult thick with the smoke of incense and populated with a legion of gleaming icons’ is all about. It manifests the fact that God is with us and we are with Him, with all of the angels and saints and the whole of creation, in a ‘kingdom which cannot be shaken.’ Everything in the Church—not only the icons and the incense, but also the songs and the hymns, the dogmas and the prayers, the vestments and the candles, the processions and the prostrations—bears wit-*

*ness to the fact that the Church is salvation: communion with God in His redeemed, resurrected, transfigured and glorified creation. Everything proclaims the fact that the Messiah has come, that God is with us, and that all things have been made new. Everything cries out with the fact that 'through Him we have access in one Spirit to the Father' and are 'no longer strangers and sojourners, but . . . fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God . . . Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together, and grows into a holy temple in the Lord . . . a dwelling place of God in the Spirit' (Eph. 2:18-22).<sup>8</sup>*

We must realize that Christianity is a personal encounter with the living Christ and not merely with the symbols of the Church. Symbols are means toward this goal. Only as long as they contribute toward this goal are symbols valid. Christians used symbols from the beginning. They employed such symbols as the Peacock (symbol of the resurrection), the Dove (symbol of the peace of Christ), the Fish and the Shepherd (symbols of Christ).

---

### *Symbols and Children*

---

In the Orthodox Church children first experience the faith through its art and symbols. From the earliest years the child is exposed to the same symbols as the adults are. There are no children's liturgies, for example. The child begins to be introduced to God early through the senses by kissing the icons, saying the Jesus Prayer, etc. These are the same symbols as the adults use, so the child does not have to outgrow them at a later date. As Sophie Koulomzin writes, "In our Church all these physical objects, sensations and experiences are not merely religious baby-talk to be discarded later. Each of the things . . . remains a perfectly valid, meaningful action, gesture or experience throughout an Orthodox Christian's life."

As the child grows it will want to know what these symbols mean. It will ask questions about them which will give parents the opportunity to share their faith with their children. Joshua, for example, placed twelve stones at the ford where his army crossed the Jordan River, noting that future generations would ask, "What

do these stones mean?" The question would give an opportunity to tell of the victory of their people. Thus, the symbols of the Church serve as powerful tools for educating our children in the faith.

Nikos Kazantzakis, author of "Zorba the Greek" wrote, "The Word, in order to touch me, must become flesh. Only then do I understand—when I can smell, see and touch." This is exactly what religious symbols help us do. The Word, the faith, must be made tangible and palpable if our children are to know it in their hearts as well as in their heads.

---

### *Symbols in the Bible*

---

The use of symbols is scriptural. More than once the prophets resorted to symbolic actions when they felt that words were not enough to convey their message. That is what Jeremiah did when he made bonds and yokes and wore them to express the coming servitude of the Jews (Jeremiah 27). That is what Jesus did when He introduced the Eucharist during the Jewish Passover meal and said to His disciples, "Look! Just as this bread is broken, my body will be broken for you. Just as this cup of wine is poured out, so my blood will be poured out for your salvation." The meal which commemorated liberation from the slavery of Egypt was chosen by Jesus to introduce the Eucharist through which the blood of the Lamb of God—Jesus—would be given to us through the ages, not in a symbolic but in a real way, to liberate us from slavery to sin and death.

The Book of Revelation is replete with symbols. The harlot Babylon is pagan Rome. The woman pursued into the desert is the Church. The beast whose number is 666 is Nero. The plagues suggest that like the slaves in the Exodus, the new people of Israel can look forward to deliverance. The rich use of symbolism in the Orthodox Church is anchored in Scripture. That is perhaps why Rheinhold Neihbur said once, "It is the task of theologians to interpret symbols."

---

### *Symbols Shape Us*

---

Sir Winston Churchill said once that we first shape buildings and then they shape us. So it is with symbols. The Bible and the Church have shaped symbols for us and then they in turn shape us. As Father John of Kronstadt wrote:

*The Church, through the ordering of the church building and her divine service, acts upon the whole man, educates him wholly; acts upon his sight, hearing, smelling, feeling, taste, imagining, mind and will, by the splendor of the images, and of the building in general, by the fragrance of the incense, by the veneration of the gospels, cross and images, by the singing, and by the reading of the scriptures.<sup>9</sup>*

---

**Be a Symbol**

---

St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome stands on the site of Nero's Circus, a stadium where public shows were put on by the emperor, including the martyrdom of many Christians. In that arena stood an obelisk, a monumental shaft of stone brought from Egypt. That shaft now stands in the center of St. Peter's Square, and surmounting the monument is a cross, symbolic of the fact that the might of the Roman Empire lost out to the power of the Christian faith.

Christianity won because the Christians, as has been truly said, out-thought, out-lived, and out-died their pagan contemporaries. Their strong commitment was based on faith that God would be with them in life, in death, and beyond—so there was nothing to fear.

The ultimate is not just to have symbols but to *be* a symbol. And those early Christians became, by God's grace, symbols of God's presence in the world. They were light, salt and yeast for Christ. By God's grace and through His presence in us each one of us can be a living symbol glorifying the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*“He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on  
Mt. Sinai,*

*Saying, ‘I am who is,’*

*Was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the  
disciples;*

*And in his own person he showed them the nature  
of man,*

*Arrayed in the original beauty of the image.*

*Having gone up the mountain, O Christ, with thy  
disciples,*

*Transfigured thou hast made our human nature,  
Grown dark in Adam, to shine again as lightning,  
Transforming it into the glory and splendour of  
thine own divinity.'*

*Orthodox Hymn—Transfiguration*