

The Apse Mosaic at San Clemente, Rome

The Apse at San Clemente is filled with symbolism and such magnificent beauty that it will leave you in a state of admiration. At first glance it seems as though the Apse is a jumbled mess surrounding a simple crucifixion scene, however, the symbolism is simply genius as every image and character depicted holds great importance.

This apse mosaic centers on a cross that relates to a vision of Paradise that merges with images of the Church in the contemporary world. Its most prominent feature is a vast vine studded with figures of lords and stewards, Doctors of the Church, and peasants engaged in their daily tasks.

The vine is identified as the Church by an inscription along the band just above the sheep: *Ecclesiam Christi viti similibimus isti de ligno crucis Jacobi dens, Ignatiq[ue] insupra scripti requiescunt corpore Christi quam lex arentem, sed crux facit esse virentem*, "We have likened the Church of Christ to this vine; the Law made it wither but the Cross made it bloom.

The cross is a complete crucifixion scene with Mary and St. John beside it and the hand of God the Father above, offering a wreath of victory to Christ. The Apostles are represented several different ways in the mosaic. First, the apostles appear as doves surrounding Jesus on the cross. In the Catholic faith doves are symbols of peace and is a sign of the Holy Spirit filling the earth on Pentecost. The Apostles are again represented at the very bottom of the Mosaic as twelve sheep that face toward the Lamb of God, an image based on the Book of Revelation. Due to the traditional golden halo around his head, Jesus can be found represented as a lamb in the center. Jesus used the metaphor of sheep throughout the New Testament and was also referred to as the Lamb of God. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb from God.



Located at the base of the cross is a tree, considered to be the **tree of life**. The tree of life is a reference from Revelation 22:2. "On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." Through the crucifixion, people of all nations are saved. Some may even refer to

the cross itself as being the tree of life which can be seen with the way the cross emerges out of the tree and is then wrapped with the vines. Branching out from the tree on both sides are swirling vines that cover the entire mosaic branching out to all of humanity.

Underneath the tree of Life, there are four streams of water coming out of the tree that signifies the four rivers of Eden. Two deer are drinking these waters flowing out the tree of life. This scene comes from Psalms 42:1, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God."

Behind the deer there are two peacocks, one on each side of the mosaic. According to ancient beliefs, the Peacock had pure immortal flesh, which is why it became associated with the resurrection of Christ.

Where the apse meets the flat surface, the mosaic represents Bethlehem on the left and Jerusalem on the right. Both are presented as loci of historical events, not as heavenly idealizations. In Bethlehem we see an image of the boy Christ and of another boy running down a flight of stairs; in Jerusalem a cross and a cock remind viewers that this city was the scene of the Crucifixion and of Peter's denial.

Above the two towns are Isaiah (left side) and Jeremiah (right side) and two pairs of saints: St. Lawrence and St. Paul on the left and St. Clement and St. Peter, on the right.

The risen and reigning Christ is above the entire work, in a medallion over the highest point of the arch.

I encourage you to look at this picture and discover other symbols that Masolino da Panicale created in the 12th century.

Additional Resources

Cosmic Significance of the Cross: An Easter Sermon of Pseudo-Hippolytus

<http://catholicgnosis.wordpress.com/2009/01/09/pseudo-hippolytus-on-cosmic-significance-of-the-cross/>

Pseudo-Hippolytus is an anonymous author of the 4th century.

"This tree is for me a plant of eternal salvation. By it I am nourished, by it I am fed. By its roots, I am firmly planted. By its branches, I am spread out, its perfume is a delight to me, and its spirit refreshes me like a delightful wind. I have pitched my tent in its shadow, and during the heat I find it to be a haven full of fragrance, [...] This tree of heavenly proportions rises up from the earth to heaven. It is fixed, as an eternal growth, at the midpoint of heaven and earth. It sustains all things as the support of the universe, the base of the whole inhabited world, and the axis of the earth. Established by the invisible pegs of the Spirit, it holds together the various aspects of human nature in such a way that, divinely guided, its nature may never again become separated from God. By its peak which touches the height of the heavens, by its base which supports the earth, and by its immense arms subduing the many spirits of the air on every side, it exists in its totality in everything and in every place." Source: *De Pascha Homilia* 6, [Migne PG 59](#) (Chrysostom, Spuria) 743f.

English translation: Alister E. McGrath, [The Christian Theology Reader](#), Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 291. Cf. Hugo Rahner, [Greek Myths and Christian Mystery](#), Biblo & Tannen Publishers, 1971, pp. 66-67; Edwin Oliver James, [The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study](#), Brill, 1967, p. 162.