

**WHAT ARE LITURGICAL  
SIGNS AND SYMBOLS?**

# WHAT ARE LITURGICAL SIGNS AND SYMBOLS?

**A SIGN** is something that leads to something else.

There are at least three types of signs:

- **Conventional signs** have a *connection with* what is signified only by agreement among people, as a flag symbolizes a nation.
- **Instrumental signs** *give meaning* or understanding, as words lead to the knowledge of things and of mental status.
- **Manifestative signs** *show the existence of* something else, as a person's external behaviour indicates his or her personality and training.

## WHAT THEN ARE SYMBOLS?

A symbol is a mark, sign, or word that indicates, signifies, or is understood as representing an idea, object, or relationship. Symbols are a form of 'language' that helps us give expression to the moments of grace that mark our lives. Symbols allow people to go beyond what is known or seen by creating linkages between otherwise very different concepts and experiences.

## WHAT ARE SYMBOLS? (2)

The whole of the Church' liturgy is built on the function of word, action, and object signs as symbols of the sacred. But among the sacred signs the most important are the sacraments, which not only manifest the special presence of God but actually confer the grace they signify.

## **WHY DO WE NEED SYMBOLS AND SIGNS?**

We are not pure spirits, but persons composed of both body and soul; we are physical as well as spiritual. Unlike angels, we have to struggle to learn anything and all of our knowledge begins in our senses.

All our knowledge begins with observation of things of which we form images from which we draw ideas.

## **DO WE NEED SIGNS AND SYMBOLS TO KNOW GOD? (1)**

We need symbols that speak to us of the sacred. We grow our faith by accepting divine revelation on God's authority. But then we apply our minds to those things which He has reveals through the signs and symbols which are presented to our sense. So, in order to know what God has revealed, we rely on human reasoning and faith.

## **DO WE NEED SIGNS AND SYMBOLS TO KNOW GOD? (2)**

In our present age, we are confronted with so many flashing images and shrill sounds competing for our attention that we can end up feeling fragmented, because we have no time to reflect or to be still. We sometimes long for peace and a sense of calm.

## **DO WE NEED SIGNS AND SYMBOLS TO KNOW GOD? (3)**

In the liturgy and in all sacraments simple elements from life are brought forward and made sacred. Light, water, clothing, oil, hands, bread and wine are transformed from ordinary objects into the gift of God's grace and presence with us, and we too are transformed into images of Christ.





SYMBOLS ASSOCIATED  
WITH THE SACRAMENTS?

## SIGNS AND SYMBOLS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SACRAMENTS (1)

### **Baptism –**

Water (Holy Water),

Salt,

Oils (for anointing),

White Cloth (sign of grace),

Lighted Candles (symbol for Christ),

Bible (God's word).

## **SIGNS AND SYMBOLS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SACRAMENTS (2)**

### **Eucharist –**

Bread, Wine, Water,

Altar, Tabernacle,

Ashes, Candles,

Ambo, Lectern, White cloth,

Vestments (stole, Chasuble, Dalmatic, Mitre, Skull cap,

Crosier, Biretta, Cinture, Alb, Soutane, Tunic, Scapular,

Capuce, Amice,

Chalice, Ciborium, Cruet,

Bible, Missal, Crucifix, Monstrance, Humeral Veil

## SIGNS AND SYMBOLS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SACRAMENTS (3)

### **Confirmation –**

Oil of Chrism,

Candles,

Mitre,

Crosier

### **Confession –**

Purple stole, Confessional

### **Holy Orders – Bishop,**

Priests, Deacons,

Book of the Gospels, Bishop's ring.



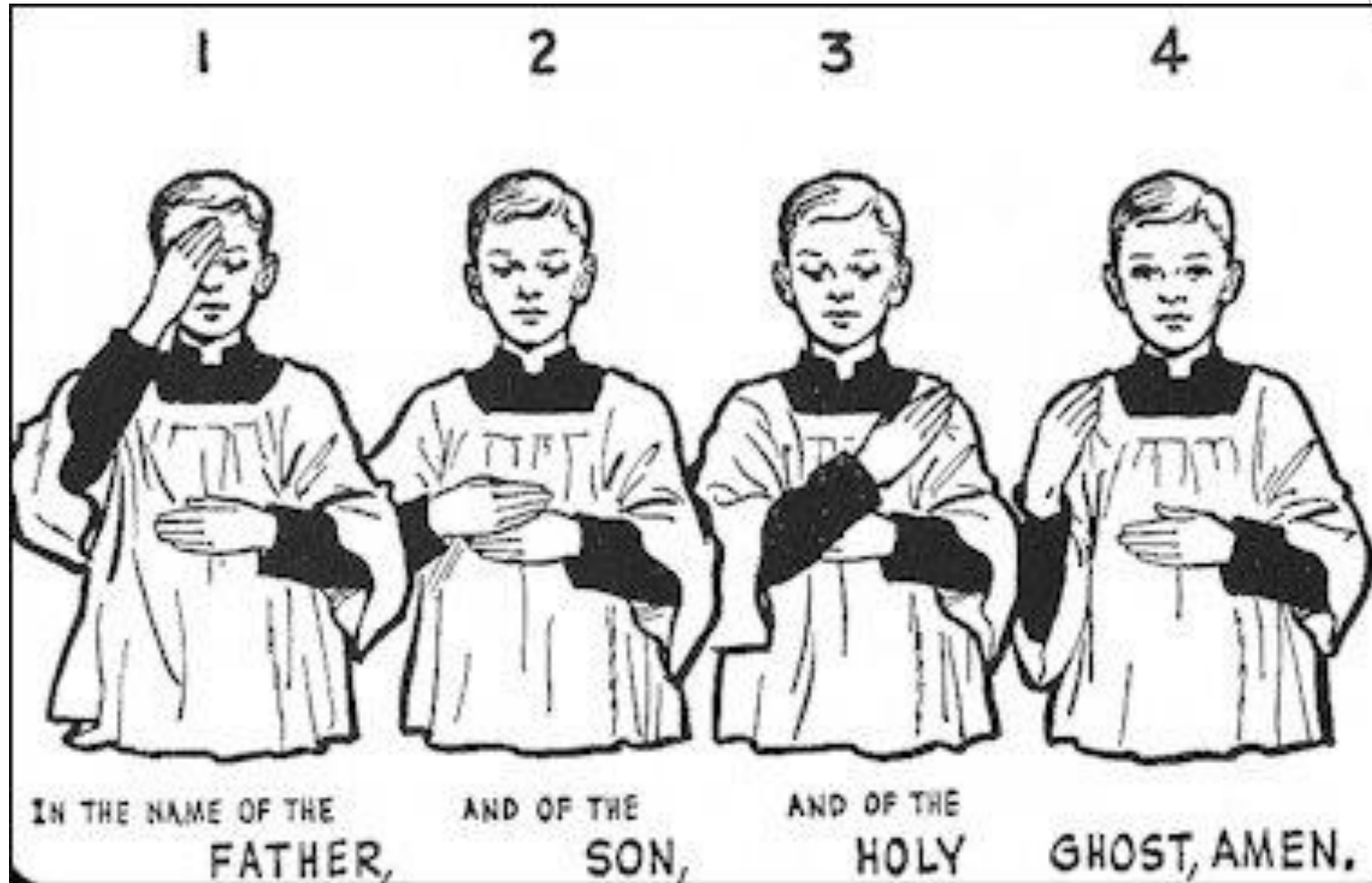


# SIGNS AND SYMBOLS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SACRAMENTS (4)

- ▶ **Anointing of the Sick** -  
Oil of the Sick,  
Holy Water.
- ▶ **Marriage** -  
Bride,  
Groom,  
Rings.



# LITURGICAL GESTURES



# SOME LITURGICAL GESTURES (1)

- ▶ **Bowing**, Genuflection, Sign of the Cross, Kiss of Peace,
- ▶ **Kneeling** (Jesus knelt to pray; Matthew 8:2; 9:18; 15:25; Luke 22:41),
- ▶ **Standing** (an expression of vigilance and readiness for action),
- ▶ **Sitting** (this is a receptive position, listening and taking in God's Word),

## SOME LITURGICAL GESTURES (2)

- ▶ **Procession, Prostration** (during ordinations and religious professions and an act of personal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, a sign of helplessness and self-emptying),
- ▶ **Folding of hands** (vulnerability and trust),
- ▶ **Striking the breast,**
- ▶ **Singing,**
- ▶ **Laying on of hands** (on persons and on sacred species).



## SOME LITURGICAL GESTURES (3)

- ▶ Care for gesture and posture enables us to pray in an integrated way, “with heart and hands and voices.” When we pray together with the Church, we should always move as the Church directs us: sit, stand, bow, kneel, strike the breast, make the Sign of the Cross, all in due time. In praying with our bodies, we are offering back to God all that He has given us.

# HOLY IMAGES (LITURGICAL ARTS)

- ▶ *“All the signs in the liturgical celebrations,” the Catechism teaches, “are related to Christ: as are sacred images of the holy Mother of God and of the saints as well. They truly signify Christ, who is glorified in them” (CCC 1161).*
- ▶ **These include** – Images of the Trinity, Christ, The Blessed Virgin Mary, The Saints and so on.



# TOP 10 SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

# “WATER

It cleanses and refreshes and is necessary for life. Water is a central symbol for Christians because in **Baptism** it signifies that we die with Christ and rise to new life with him (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12).



# LIGHTED CANDLES

In the Old Testament, fire is a symbol of God's purifying presence. Examples are the burning bush of Moses' encounter (Exodus 3:1-17) and the pillar of fire which accompanied Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21).

The candles placed near the altar are always lit during Mass to signify that Christ is the light (John 8:12). Other forms of light are the Paschal candle and the tabernacle light.



# THE ALTAR

The central focal point in a church and a **symbol of Christ**. It is the place where the sacrifice of the cross is made present and truly reencountered. It is also the table of the Lord to which the People of God are called to celebrate Mass.





# THE CRUCIFIX

A cross with a representation of Jesus' dead body. It is a symbol of paradox: new life comes through death.



# THE CHALICE

The cup used during Mass that holds the wine before the Consecration and the Blood of Christ after the Consecration.

It represents the cup used at the Last Supper and is a **symbol of Jesus' sacrifice and eternal life**. Before Jesus died he prayed:

*"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done"* (Luke 22:42).





# WHITE GARMENT

After Baptism, newly initiated Catholics are clothed in white garments to signify that they are **new creations in Christ Jesus** and the **pure life of grace**. It is also a **sign of our future glory** (Revelation 7:13; 19:8).

The Priest wears a white alb for Mass which represents his **baptismal garment**. We Dominicans wear a white habit (made up of a tunic, scapular and capuce) which signify purity.



# OIL (1)

In the Catholic Church, there are basically three types of sacramental oil: *The oil of **Chrism**, the oil of **Catechumen** and the oil of **the sick**.*

For the Jewish people, our ancestors in faith, anointing with oil meant **setting the person apart for a particular mission.**

Just as royalty and Priests are anointed for a particular mission, so are we as Christians given a particular mission to be Christ in the world today.



## OIL (2)

The word **Christ** means *the Anointed*. We call ourselves Christians because we are anointed in Baptism as priests, prophets and kings in the footsteps of Christ.

We are the community anointed to continue the work of Christ, **the anointed one**.





# PALM FROND

A symbol of **triumph**. In John's Gospel Jesus was hailed as king by people waving palm branches in celebration as he entered Jerusalem (John 12:12–19). This is remembered on Palm Sunday.

**The Ashes** – made from the burnt palms of Passion Sunday, and used on Ash Wednesday, remind us of our *mortality, our sinfulness and our need for God* (Genesis 2:7; Mark 1:15).



# SINGING

*“Song and music fulfill their function as signs in a manner all the more significant when they are more closely connected... with the liturgical action, according to three principal criteria: **beauty** **expressive of prayer**, the **unanimous participation of the assembly**... and the **solemn character of the celebration**” (CCC 1157).*



# INCENSE

The fragrant smoke rising from burning incense is a **symbol of prayers** rising up to God (Revelation 8:4).





# 10 LITURGICAL ART SYMBOLS YOU SHOULD KNOW

**Alpha and Omega** - The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They appear together on the Paschal candle and signify *the eternal presence of Jesus Christ*. Christ is the beginning and the end.

Α Ω

# CHI RHO

An ancient symbol for Christ. X (chi) and P (rho) are *the first two letters* in the Greek word for Christ.

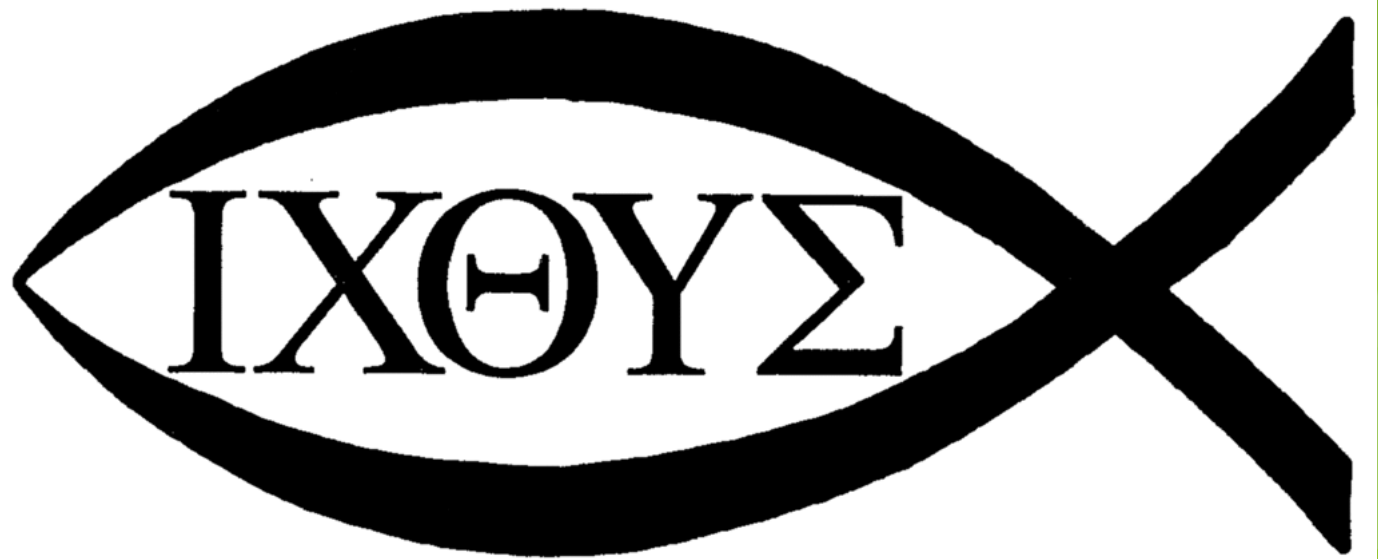




# ICTHUS

Greek for “fish.” Early Christians used the term to refer to “**Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Saviour**” (Iesous Christos, Theou Uios, Soter).

In Greek the *first letter of each word in the phrase spells the word for fish.*



## IHS

The first three letters of Jesus' name in Greek: iota (I), eta (H), sigma (S).

## INRI

An abbreviation of the Latin phrase *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*. The Gospel of John 19: 19 says Pilate had this written in three languages and put on Jesus' cross. It means "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

A large, black, stylized monogram of the letters IHS. The letter 'H' is uniquely designed with a crossbar that forms a cross. The letters are set against a white background.The letters INRI are rendered in a bold, black, serif font. They are contained within a stylized scroll that has a thick black border and decorative, wavy edges at the top and bottom, giving it the appearance of an ancient parchment or banner.

# TRIQUETRA

This interlocking symbol is an early Christian **symbol of the Blessed Trinity**. Its interwoven arcs of equal length signify the equality of the three Persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The continuity of the form recalls the unity in the Trinity.



# THE DOVE

The dove is a white bird often depicted in the Catholic Church as flying gracefully before a shining aura of light.

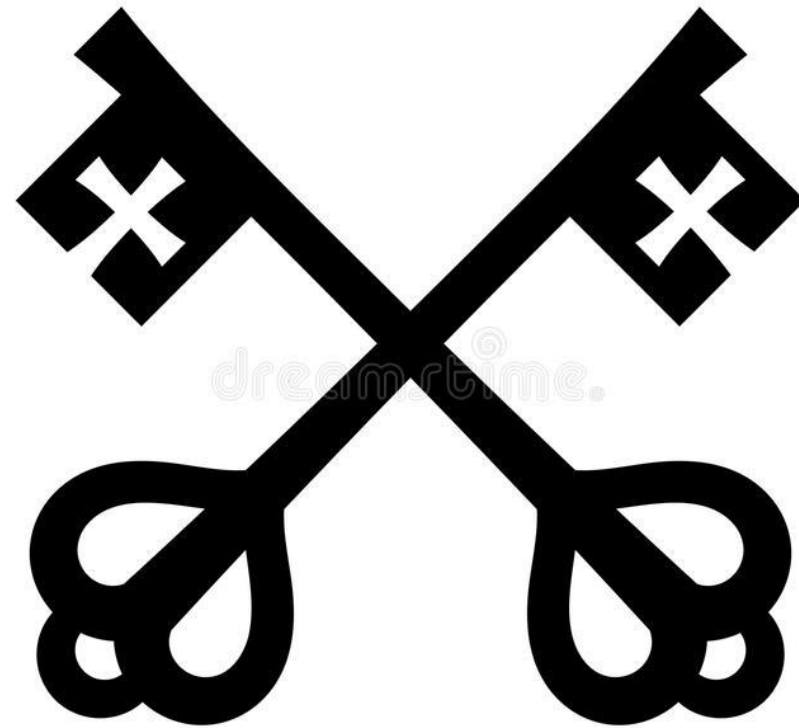
**It is a symbol for the Holy Spirit** as seen during Jesus' Baptism (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10).



# CROSSED KEYS

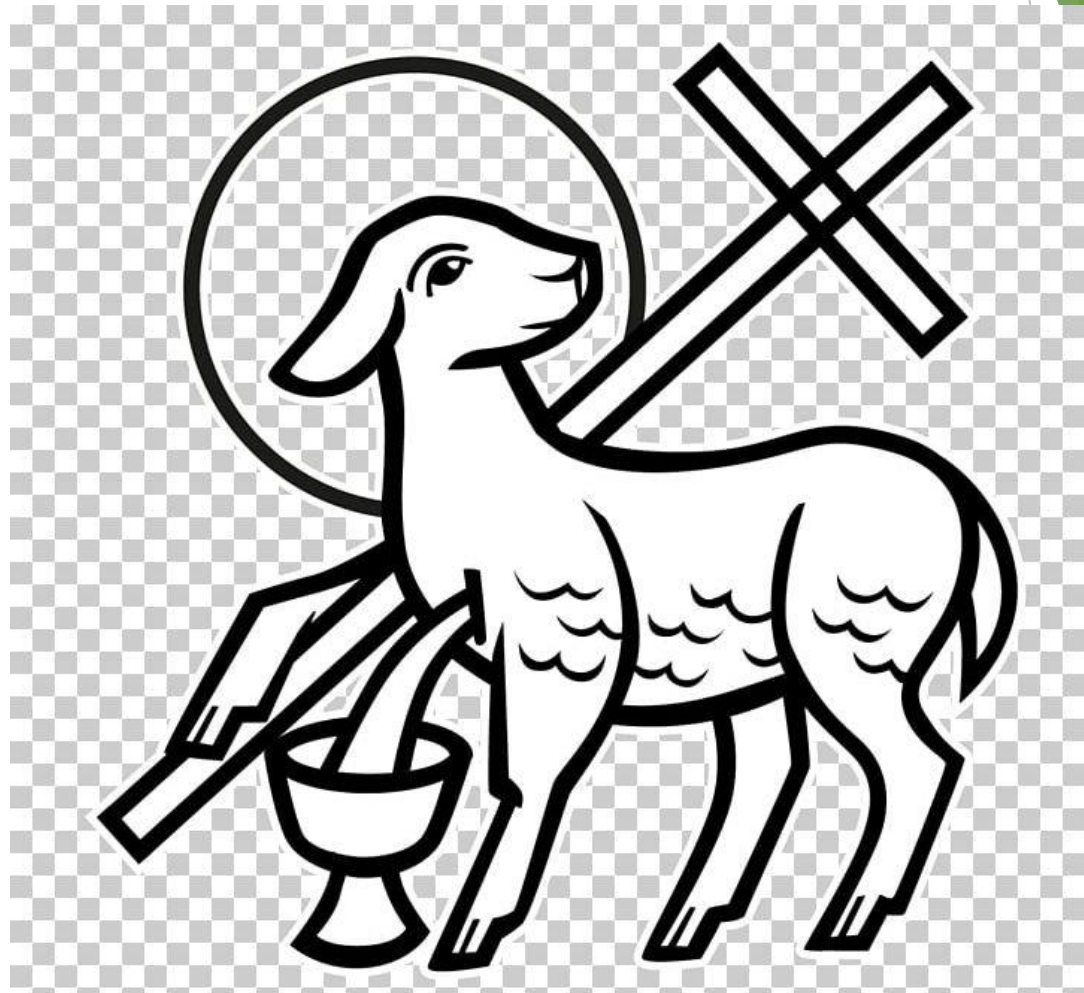
The crossed keys represent the **metaphorical keys** that Jesus promised to St. Peter, empowering him to take binding actions in leading the institution of the Catholic Church.

In short, they are *a symbol of the Pope's authority.*



# THE LAMB

One of the most important symbols of Christ is the Lamb. **Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God** is mentioned in **John 1:35-36** and **Revelation 5:6-14**, and always in the words of the Mass.

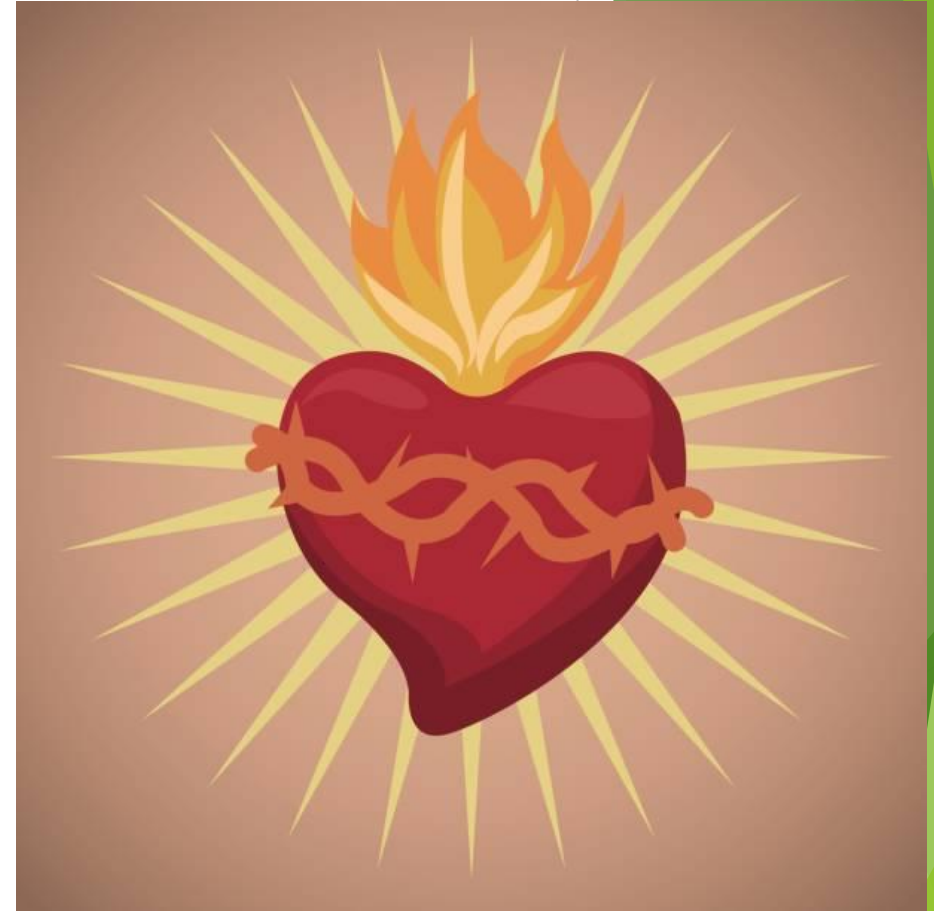




# SACRED HEART

The Sacred Heart is usually depicted as a flaming heart. It is also usually shining with divine light, pierced (presumably from a lance), encircled by a crown of thorns, surmounted by a cross, and bleeding.

Sometimes it is shown in the bosom of Jesus Christ. The wound, thorns, and blood represent **Jesus' crucifixion**, and the flames represent **the transformative power of divine love**.



# IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

It has the following attributes;

a **burning bloodied heart**, pierced with a **sword**, banded with **roses**, and **lily flowers**.

The sword is a depiction of the words, *“(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed”* (Luke 2:35).

**Fire** emphasizes the intensity of her love for God and for humanity. The roses and lily flowers represent her **purity**.





# FINALLY...

Whether as members of the assembly/congregation or persons with specific functions to perform, we enter fully into the mystery of the Liturgy by allowing the signs and symbols of the sacred place (the church) to influence our participation.

As the Catechism puts it, our “contemplation of [the] sacred icons, united with meditation on the Word of God and the singing of liturgical hymns” is “imprinted in the heart’s memory” and “then expressed in the new life of the faithful” (CCC 1162) not only during our worship at Mass, but when we go forth from Mass ... to love and serve the Lord.

