

ILLUMINATED IMAGES OF CHRIST:  
CONTEMPORARY PAINTINGS  
INSPIRED BY HISTORIC  
IMAGES

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Auburn University Montgomery  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts

Montgomery, Alabama

18 February 2001

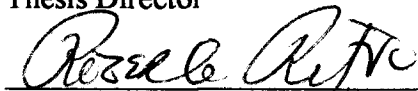
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to the members of the AUM faculty who graciously guided and encouraged me. Dr. Guin Nance gently propelled me back into the world of academia after a long absence. Dr. Mike Simmons helped open the door to Christian iconography. Dr. Susan Willis was always ready to assist and answer my many questions. Dr. Susan Hood devoted many hours to my cause and showed me a new way of teaching. Mrs. Nancy Anderson volunteered her time, expertise, and support when it was not required of her to do so. Finally, a special note of thanks to Mr. Rick Mills who not only patiently guided and gently corrected my artistic efforts in the kindest way possible, but also served as an inspiration throughout the entire process. To each one I am grateful.

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## INTRODUCTION

The paintings titled *Illuminated Images of Christ* are the product of a study of art and Christian iconography. My interest in Christian iconography was sown during my childhood, a product of my Roman Catholic upbringing. Some of my earliest memories are of the interior of churches, beautifully embellished with a variety of painted and carved images. As an adult, travels in Europe have allowed me to experience medieval art and architecture firsthand. Art has always been a part of my life, and for eighteen years I have taught art and history in public schools. Additionally, completion of a four year Education for Ministry course increased my understanding of the Christian faith. The Master of Liberal Arts program provided the opportunity for me to examine Christian iconography from the perspective of an artist.

The selection of an MLA thesis project evolved naturally from my study of the origins of Christian iconography and painting. My admiration of illuminated manuscripts led me to choose that style for my paintings. The finished thesis project consists of ten original paintings that incorporate traditional Christian iconography and were inspired by medieval illuminations.

Use of the term *illuminated* to describe illustrations in medieval manuscripts can have more than one meaning. *Illumine* is derived from the Latin *lumen* (to light). In a spiritual sense, Christ as the “Word” of God illumines humankind. Correspondingly, medieval painters believed it was fitting to illuminate physically the images in 2 manuscripts that expressed the Word of God. The term was initially used to refer to

illustrations in medieval manuscripts that were embellished with gold or silver, for when light reflected off the gilded surfaces the images appeared to be lit from within. The term is now generally applied to any illustration in a manuscript. Although my paintings are not illustrations for a text, I have chosen to refer to them as illuminations for several reasons. Each image illustrates a scriptural verse, and gold has been used to embellish all of the paintings. The paintings are an expression of Christian doctrine, and the term illumination draws a connection between the contemporary paintings and the historic images that inspired their production.

In the pages that follow, I will summarize the origins of Early Christian iconography. I will then discuss the elements that make up each of the ten paintings and explain the iconographic motifs that appear in the paintings.

## CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY

In Iconography of Christian Art, Gertrud Shiller states: "The function of Christian art is highly allusive: it suggests something beyond the visible object. Each artistic representation of a biblical story is not merely an illustration of the text, but, whether the artist is aware of the fact or not, an interpretation" (I 1). I define "Christian" art as art that conveys basic beliefs of the Christian faith. Christian art attempts to pictorialize that which cannot be pictorialized. This is accomplished through symbols.

The earliest surviving examples of Christian art date to the end of the second or the beginning of the third century. These examples are found in ancient catacombs located in Italy, North Africa, Greece, the Aegean Islands, Malta, and Egypt. Dura Europos, in Iraq, is the site of the oldest existing Christian house church, built in 232. Both the catacombs and the Dura site contain frescoes depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Other examples of early Christian art are mosaics, sculptured sarcophagi and carvings on ossuaries. The content of the art (themes or subject matter), as well as the context (setting in which the art is located), provide the indicators necessary for historians to distinguish Christian art from pagan Roman art. Although elaborate decorative motifs may be included, most early Christian images lack intricate detailing and are usually rendered quite simply.

In Understanding Early Christian Art, R. M. Jensen divides early Christian art into three general categories: 1) images borrowed from pagan sources and adapted to



symbolic meaning, and 3) narrative based images drawn from Old and New Testament stories (17).

The good shepherd, the orans, and meal scenes are examples of motifs borrowed from pagan images. The good shepherd was originally the Roman Orpheus, a beautiful young man bearing a lamb across his shoulders. Christians easily adapted this figure to represent Christ, who had referred to himself as the Good Shepherd in the gospel accounts of John (10:11-16) and Luke (15:4-7). Examples are located in the catacomb of Callixtus in Rome, and in the baptistery at Dura.

The “orans” is a symbolic pose in which a figure is depicted standing with arms raised. It can be traced to Greek and Roman sources. For the early Christians, the orans signified worship and prayer. Many examples are found in Roman catacombs.

Pagan meal scenes stemmed from a custom called the *refrigerium*, during which family members ate a meal at the tomb of a relative on the anniversary of his or her death (Gough 45). Christians adapted meal scenes to represent the Eucharist, symbolic of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. In the catacomb of Callixtus alone, three separate frescoes depict the holy meal.

Lambs and fish are examples of popular Roman decorative motifs that were endowed with symbolic Christian meaning. A pastoral motif in Roman art, the lamb is a figure that has a dual meaning in Christian iconography, depending upon its use. It may symbolize the sinner that Christ came to save, as in a third century wall painting in the catacomb of Saints Pietro and Marcellino in Rome. In the central circle of this painting, lambs are placed on each side of Christ the Good Shepherd, who also bears a lamb across

his shoulders. The lamb motif is also used to represent Christ as the sacrificial Lamb, based on the gospel of John (1:29), Revelation (5:12), and the Old Testament book of Isaiah (53:7). The sacrificial lamb motif will be developed more fully in the discussion of my painting of the Baptism of Christ.

The fish is one of the earliest symbols used to represent Christ. There are many associations of the fish with Jesus, including the feeding of the five thousand related in Matthew (13:15-21) and his promise to make the apostles “fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). Additionally, the Greek letters for the word fish (IXOYC) form a cryptogram representing the initials for the profession of faith: Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Savior. The origin of the concept of the “Divine Fish” may stem from the pagan cult of Dagon and the goddess Atargatis, both of whom are “represented in art as fish and whose powers might be assumed by the devotee who ate a meal of fish” (Gough 24).

In addition to endowing popular motifs with symbolic meaning, early Christians devised a number of uniquely Christian symbols. Examples of these are the anchor-cross and monograms of Christ. The Jewish heritage of the first Christians was influential in their overt use of symbolism. The second of the Ten Commandments given to Moses prohibited the making of images of God. Accordingly, the early Christians were reluctant to make realistic images of Christ; instead, they created symbols to represent Christ.

The single Christian symbol most widely recognized today is the cross. In the early era the cross was not openly used as a symbol of faith. Use of the cross as an instrument of execution for common criminals, coupled with accusations against the early

Christians that they worshipped the cross, may account for this. However, the image the cross does appear in the catacombs in a variety of forms, one of which was the anchor-cross. An example in the catacomb of Priscilla, depicts an anchor with a fish on either side of the main bar of the anchor.

One of the earliest monograms for Christ was IHC (IHS in Latin) derived from the first three letters of the Greek word for Jesus (IHCOUC). The Chi Rho is another early monogram formed from the first two letters, XP, of the Greek word for Christ (XPICTOC) when all capital letters are used. These letters were combined in various ways to produce a variety of symbols, and an example is carved into an early fourth century funerary relief now located in the Museo delle Terme in Rome.

The third category of early Christian art is that of narrative based images drawn from Old and New Testament accounts. The early Christians viewed the events of Jesus' life as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Schiller I 58), and this accounts for the frequency of the depiction of Old Testament figures. The figure of Jonah appears more than seventy times in the surviving examples of early Christian art, thirty of which are included in series of three or four episodes (Jensen 172). The oldest known image of Jonah is from the third century and is located in the Crypt of Lucina, in the catacomb of Callixtus. The Jonah figure is typologically related to the resurrection of Christ. In early Christian art, both Jonah and Daniel convey themes of deliverance.

Some historians believe that the persecution of Christians during the early period was reflected in their art by a thematic emphasis on "safety, security, and deliverance" (Jensen 27). It is my feeling that the frequent appearance of the Daniel may signify that

that he is a prototype for the Christian martyr. In a painting in the catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Daniel is depicted standing in the orans position between two lions.

The earliest Christian images were usually singular figures or motifs that were not linked to other images. With the progression of time, pictorial cycles developed, in which a series of related images would be placed next to one another. Although all of the early artistic representations were an expression of faith, they were not attempts to explain the principles of Christian doctrine (Grabar 39).

In the early fourth century a turning point occurred in both Church history and Christian artistic expression. Roman emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, granting recognition to Christianity in the Roman Empire. Additionally, Constantine financed the construction of buildings and art to embellish the buildings in which Christians could worship. Constantine thus became the first imperial patron of Christian art, and Christians increasingly enjoyed social prestige and political power.

Changes occurred in both the form and appearance of Christian art. Some motifs that were popular in the early period would gradually cease to be represented in Christian art after Constantine; two examples are Christ as the Good Shepherd and Jonah. Also, the repertoire of subjects depicted increased, and a new category of Christian art emerges—the portrait. Images of Christ, martyrs, and saints would figure prominently in Christian art from this time forward.

Portrait images were not realistic likenesses of individuals, but were portrayals based on established formulas. Images of Christ were depicted in the manner of the emperors

of the Roman Empire. The mosaic on the triumphal arch of San Paolo, Rome, c.450, is an example of this new portrayal. Christ is shown seated on a throne, wearing a purple robe trimmed in gold, and holding a book. This mode of expression was a departure from the earlier images of Christ as the Good Shepherd, now emphasizing his divine sovereign nature.

The fourth century saw other changes that had an impact on Christian artistic expression. A number of Church councils were held which addressed issues that would establish official Church doctrine. One such issue was the divine-and-human nature of Christ, and another was the role of the Virgin Mary. As Church doctrine evolved, so too, did the iconography of Christian art. Artistic expressions of Christian doctrine in the early era were, for the most part, accidental or at the least incomplete. After the time of Constantine the expression of doctrinal iconography became intentional, and art was used for instructive purposes. Beginning in the fourth century, schematic themes and established pictorial cycles evolved, becoming more complex with the passage of time. Typological equations between Old and New Testament figures would be developed more fully in the Middle Ages.

The seeds of Christian iconography that sprouted in the early period rapidly grew and developed in the post-Constantinian era. Stylistically, Greco-Roman realism gave way to imagery that was more abstract and formal. The degree of abstraction in medieval art varied from region to region and from century to century, yet, under the direction of the Church, Christian art of the Middle Ages was imbued with symbolic and allegorical meaning.

My inspiration for the imagery in the ten paintings that comprise my thesis project was drawn from sculpture and wall paintings as well as from illuminated manuscripts. Although not realistic, the figures in medieval manuscripts are lively and animated. I am especially attracted by the vibrant colors, patterns, abstracted rendering of figures and ornamentation that appear in the pages of illuminated manuscripts, especially those of the Winchester School. I admire the economy of means in the paintings, as well as the paradoxical complexity that I observe in them. The design elements from which I drew inspiration included historiated initials, decorative borders, and patterned backgrounds. I have expressed these elements in new ways to create original works of art. In the following pages I will discuss my paintings with particular reference to the iconographic motifs I have chosen to employ in them.

## TEN CONTEMPORARY ILLUMINATED IMAGES

My paintings are original and were produced using modern materials.

Materials used to complete the paintings include watercolor, acrylic, inks, colored pencils, and graphite. Each image was composed in pencil and transferred to 11 x 14" acid-free drawing paper. This was dry-mounted on foam board, stained with a solution of tea, and painted. As many as six to eight layers of paint were used to achieve the depth of color I desired in the finished paintings.

In composing the images, I first selected ten themes reflective of the essential nature or being of Christ: The Holy Trinity, The Incarnation, The Baptism of Christ, Christ the Teacher, Christ the Miracle Worker, The Holy Eucharist, The Crucifixion, The Resurrection, The Pantocrator, and Christ in Majesty. I believe that if any of these images were omitted my portrayal of Christ would be incomplete.

I consciously selected scriptures that convey a hopeful message. I then developed compositions that related the chosen scripture to the theme of each painting. In both developing the compositions and executing the paintings, I began with The Holy Trinity and worked on the paintings one at a time in the order that they are listed above. Although minor alterations were made in some of the compositions as I worked, only one of the original compositions, The Incarnation, was discarded and a new composition developed. However, due to technical difficulties (the paper separated from the foam

backing twice and was damaged), the painting of The Resurrection had to be done three times.

My first inclination in depicting Christ was to liken him to the earliest Christian images of a youthful, clean-shaven “Orpheus.” However, as I studied historic models, I decided to add a beard and long hair. Nonetheless, the image of Christ is physically strong and youthful. When the figure of Christ is depicted with other figures, his image is larger than the other figures and is always adorned with a tri-radiant nimbus. Although each painting is distinct, the compositions share the use of symbolism, repeated patterns, and vivid colors.





In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

John 1:1

HOLY

## THE HOLY TRINITY

“In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.”

(John 1:1)

The painting of The Holy Trinity acknowledges Christ's place in the eternal Godhead, and the scripture was selected to reflect this aspect of the nature of Christ. The concept of the Trinity is a crucial element of Christian doctrine, however, it was problematic for the early Christians, both theologically and iconographically. The theological question was addressed by the Council of Nicaea in 325, and Christ was declared to be consubstantial with God the Father—although the Holy Spirit was not mentioned, nor how the three natures of God (the Father, Son, and Spirit) could be distinct and yet unified at one and the same time. For the early Christian artist, the declaration of the Council of Nicaea was of little help in devising a suitable image to depict the Trinity.

Only a few attempts at pictorial representation of the Trinity from the early period are known. None was very successful in the sense of creating an image that would become part of the iconographic tradition, for they failed to convey the “oneness” of the three natures of God. During the fifth century an image of the Three angels that appeared to Sarah and Abraham was thought to be a prefiguration of the Trinity. An example

dating c. 430 is a mosaic at Sant' Maria Maggiore, Rome. The only representation of the Trinity that continued to be used from the early period through the Middle Ages to modern times is an image that depicts the Hand of God, the dove, and the figure of Christ being baptized (Grabar 114).

In my painting *The Holy Trinity*, I chose to depict three figures, but with each sharing an arm. I chose not to depict facial features in accordance with the scripture that states that no man has seen the face of God (Exodus 33:20). All three figures have a nimbus (halo), but only the figure of Christ has a tri-radiant nimbus. In historical models, God the Father and The Holy Spirit sometimes had tri-radiant nimbi, but not always. Most of the traditional images of Christ from the fifth century through the medieval era show Christ with a tri-radiant nimbus. The Christ figure also has a hand raised in blessing. The dove on the figure on the right side of the trio signifies the Holy Spirit. The dove has been used consistently from the early Christian period to modern times to represent the Holy Spirit.

The equilateral triangle and circle motifs are used throughout the composition. The equilateral triangle is a symbol of the Holy Trinity, and the circle is symbolic of eternity, having no beginning or end. Other symbols used in the composition that represent the Holy Trinity are interwoven circles and the *triquetra*. The interwoven circles are formed from three circles of identical size and woven together to signify unity. A *triquetra* (located inside of the "O" in Holy), is composed of three equal arcs of a circle fashioned from one continuous line.

The image in the enlarged “T” depicts a pair of seraphim. Seraphim are mentioned only once in the Bible, in Isaiah (6:2,3). In this passage of scripture Isaiah has a vision of God: “Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.’” Seraphim were depicted in historical images with God the Father.

At the bottom of the composition is the word “HOLY,” taken from the same scripture of Isaiah as the seraphim. Above the central figure of the composition, an angel with out-stretched arms celebrates the Trinity. A tiny repeated gold and white checkerboard pattern fills the negative space around and between the other elements in the composition. Patterns called “diapers” (from the French *diapre*, meaning “variegated”) are repeated geometric motifs used in medieval illuminations beginning about the eleventh century (Brown 49). I have used this decorative device in my painting to add visual texture and create a cohesiveness among the compositional elements.



And the Word  
became flesh and  
lived among us.  
John 1:14

Margaret Stachura, D.D.  
2008

## THE INCARNATION

“And the Word became flesh  
and lived among us.”

(John 1: 14)

The painting of The Incarnation is a celebration of the willingness of Christ to humble himself by taking on the nature of a man. I selected this particular passage of scripture because of the reference to Christ as the “Word,” which reinforces the concept of the divine nature of Christ incarnate and links this image to the preceding one.

Biblical accounts of the birth of Christ are found in Matthew (1:18-25) and Luke (2:1-20). There is little evidence to indicate that the early Christian community gave much attention to recounting the events of the Nativity of Christ before the fourth century. The emphasis of Nativity scenes from the early Christian period was on acknowledging the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, rather than on recording the actual events of his birth (Schiller I 59-60).

The earliest surviving Nativity image is a detail of a stone relief carving on the cover of the Great Frieze Sarcophagus, Rome, dating c.320-5. This example shows the Nativity only, although other early Nativity images are often part of pictorial cycles of the events associated with the birth of Christ. The Virgin Mary did not always appear in early Nativity scenes. Not until after the Council of Ephesus in 431, which declared Mary the Mother of God, did the figure of Mary become a standard part of the Nativity.

In medieval art the manger is often depicted as an altar, sometimes raised. In earlier times the raised altar-manger was used to stress the importance of the infant. However, by the twelfth century there was a growing emphasis in the Church on the “sacramental view of the Incarnation of God” and “the placement of the child on the altar paralleled the bread on the altar” in the Eucharist (Schiller I 70).

I chose to depict Christ as a young child embracing a cross to denote the ultimate purpose of his incarnation. The child is adorned with a tri-radiant nimbus and he occupies a central position in the painting. Above the central figure is a dove representing the Holy Spirit. The dove is appropriate in the Incarnation theme because of the scriptural account of the Annunciation from Luke (1:35), which states, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy."

Emblems relating to the Incarnation theme are located in each of the four corners of the composition. In the top left, two winged beings signify the visitation of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary (Post 85). In the top right corner is a monogram of the Virgin Mary. A crown is included in the monogram to signify Mary's regal standing as the mother of God. In the lower left corner is the Nativity symbol, bearing the Glastonbury Thorn. According to an ancient legend the “Holy Thorn,” which blooms at Christmas time, sprang from the staff of St. Joseph of Arimathaea, who had traveled to England during the first century as a missionary (Farmer 239-240).

The fourth corner of the composition is occupied by an emblem bearing a Unicorn. Characteristics attributed to the unicorn, such as humility and power, led to the adoption of the unicorn as a symbol for Christ during the third century. Additionally, because of an ancient legend that the unicorn could only be captured by a virgin, an association between the unicorn and the birth of Christ was established (Freeman 17).

In the border of the painting are four medallions that depict narrative scenes from the birth of Christ. The top left medallion shows The Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), and below it is a scene of The Nativity (Luke 2: 6-7). In the background of this scene are an ox and an ass. Throughout the medieval period, an ox and an ass are almost always depicted in scenes of the Nativity; yet, it is interesting to note that there is no mention of either in the scriptural accounts of the birth of Jesus. In the right top medallion is The Annunciation to the Shepherds (Luke 1: 8-14), and the fourth medallion depicts the wise men who followed the star to Bethlehem to pay homage to Christ (Matthew 2:1-12). The star in this image is a five-pointed star, a Messianic symbol of Christ (Schiller I 96), also associated with the Epiphany (Post 67).

Above the emblems located at the bottom of the painting are two *trefoil*, one on either side, that are symbolic of the Holy Trinity. Below the emblems located at the top of the painting, another symbol of the Holy Trinity, the *triquetra*, is depicted, one on either side of the composition. A repeated pattern of red, blue and gold encircles the central figure. This decorative pattern was included to emphasize the central figure and impart a



sense of grandeur and celebration. The angels that form the bottom border of the painting further contribute to the celestial theme of the Incarnation.



*Behold the Lamb of God*  
*John 1:29*

## THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

“Behold the Lamb of God

who takes away the

sin of the world.”

(John 1:29)

This scripture relates what John the Baptist declared upon seeing Christ as he approached John to be baptized. The baptism of Christ marks the beginning of his ministry on earth. Symbolically, it also marks the beginning of a new epoch for mankind--the dispensation of grace. Following Christ's example, later Christians believed that through baptism in the Spirit their sins were washed away.

The earliest known depiction of the baptism of Christ dates from the beginning of the third century and is located in the crypt of Lucina in the catacomb of Callixtus. Many images of the faithful being baptized are depicted in the catacombs, and the factor that distinguishes the baptism of Christ from others is the inclusion of the dove descending upon Christ.

In my painting of The Baptism the central image depicts the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove upon Christ at the moment of his baptism by John. Above the dove, coming from a cloud, is the *Manus Dei* (Hand of God). The *Manus Dei* was one of the earliest representations of God the Father, resulting from the Old Testament injunction against seeing the face of God (Exodus 33:20 & John 1:18).

To the right of the image of Christ is an angel holding the robe of Christ. This imagery stems from the early baptismal ceremonies during which a deacon would hold the garment of the catechumen while he was being immersed (Schiller I 134). A sixth century wall painting in the catacomb of Ponziano, in Rome, includes this image, as does an illuminated image from the Benedictional of Saint Ethelwold, c.971-84 AD.

The enlarged letter “B” contains a sevenfold flame, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, derived from Isaiah (11:2), and a Chi Rho monogram of Christ, which was discussed earlier. Directly above the central image is the *Agnus Dei*, or Lamb of God, with the Banner of Victory. This ancient symbolic motif is derived from John (1:29), as noted above, and Isaiah (53:7): “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.” By his death on the cross Christ became the Sacrificial Lamb, and by his resurrection Christ was victorious over death; thus, the Banner of Victory was added to the sacrificial lamb motif. An example of the medieval use of the sacrificial lamb is a manuscript illumination from the Alcuin Bible, c. 834 to 843, showing the lamb with a chalice. A second example is a book cover from the Meuse School, 1160 AD, depicting the lamb with the Banner of Victory.

Two medallions are included in the composition. The top medallion shows a deer drinking water from a stream. This imagery, derived from Psalm 42, was included in the ceremony of the sacrament of Baptism in early Christian times (Schiller I 131-138), and a depiction is located on the baptistery wall at Dura. Immediately following his baptism, Christ spent forty days in the desert. The gospels of Matthew (4:1-11), Mark (1:14) and

Luke (4:1-13) relate the temptation of Christ by the devil, while Christ was in the desert; the lower medallion contains a depiction of this occasion.

The cross in the lower left portion of the painting is a Maltese cross, one of more than fifty types of crosses depicted in Christian art. The white flowers above and below the cross are Columbines. The word Columbine is derived from the Latin *columba* (dove). The appearance of the Columbine is similar to the shape of a dove, thus it became a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The seven blooms on a stalk of the Columbine are symbolic of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, taken from Isaiah (11:2). The ivy on either side of the lamb at the top of the composition is symbolic of eternal life because it remains green throughout the year. The repeated blue and red diamond motif in the background was included to as a foil for the lighter images and designs in the composition.



love one another.  
John 13:34

## CHRIST THE TEACHER

“Love one another.”

(John 13:34)

The image of Christ the Teacher acknowledges the essence of Christ’s message to humankind. I chose to depict Christ with children because of his words: “Let the little children come to me and do not stop them: for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matthew 19:14), and, “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4).

Depictions of Christ’s ministry—separate from his miracles—were not represented in art as often as other events of his life such as his birth, death, or resurrection. When they are depicted, it is often as part of pictorial cycles including other themes. An example of a single image that conveys the theme of Christ as teacher is an illumination from the Codex Egberti, c.980, Reichenau School, illustrating the story of the woman taken in adultery.

Three of the medallions in the enlarged “L” contain pictorial narratives of events from the ministry of Christ. Depicted from top to bottom are: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6 and 7), Christ washing his disciples’ feet, (John 13: 1-7), and Christ preaching to the crowds from a boat (Matthew 13: 1-35). The medallion in the bend of the “L” contains a monogram of Christ, IHS, from the Greek IHCOYC, meaning “Jesus,” as noted earlier.

In the lower right corner of the composition, a form of the cross called *Alisée Patée* (Post 62). An ivy motif embellishes the area around the central figure of Christ and the children. The border is composed of a variety of images. At the top center is a sun, symbolic of Christ, the “Sun Righteousness” (Malachi 4:2), and flanking the sun on both sides are strawberries, representing “righteousness, the fruitfulness of the Spirit” (Ferguson 20). The towers forming the side borders and the jesters playing chess in the bottom border refer to popular cultural conceptions about the medieval era (although, when designing the border I did think of how “fools” on earth play games). The dragonfly and butterflies were included as decorative motifs. The butterfly is often used in Christian art as a symbol of resurrection, equating the three phases of a butterfly’s life—caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly—to life, death, and resurrection of the soul. However, this was not my intended use of the butterfly motif in this painting.





With God all things  
are possible.  
Matthew 19:26

Margaret ...  
1922

## CHRIST THE MIRACLE WORKER

“With God all things are possible.”

(Matthew 19:26)

The painting of Christ the Miracle Worker provides a glimpse into the dual nature of Jesus. The scripture verse seemed to be an appropriate reminder that God has no boundaries, even in his human form. The central image is a depiction of Christ healing the paralytic from the gospel of Matthew (9:4-5): “For which is easier, to say ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—Christ then said to the paralytic—“Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.”

The miracles of Christ have always been important for the Church because they reveal the divine nature and power of Christ. The earliest representations of miracles date to the third century.

Four medallions containing pictorial narratives are included in the composition, two on either side of the central figure. The top left image depicts Christ’s first miracle, turning water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana (John 2:1-11), and beneath it is an image of Christ sending the legion of demons from a man into a herd of swine (Luke 8:26-39). At the top right, is a depiction of the miracle of the loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:14-21), and the final medallion depicts another miraculous healing, that of the woman with an issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34).

The linear border framing the painting and around the central image contain celtic knots. The celtic knot is a motif typical of the Insular Style developed by the Irish and used in medieval illumination primarily from the seventh through the tenth centuries. The Insular Style is distinguished by its very ornate geometric interlace patterns. A late eighth-early ninth century manuscript illumination of Christ from the Book of Kells is exemplary of this style.

Four angels seem to peer down from their perch above the scripture, while two other angels hover above the central figure—celestial witnesses to the divine wonders of Christ. A deep blue and pale gold diaper pattern is used in the background to unify the various elements of the composition.



Margaret Donohue, CSM  
2000

## THE HOLY EUCHARIST

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

(Luke 22:19)

The sacrament of Holy Eucharist is central to the doctrine of the Christian faith. This sacrament is observed by Christians in commemoration of the events of the last meal that Christ ate with his disciples. This meal was eaten on the occasion of the feast of the Jewish Passover, thus linking the Eucharist with the Old Testament theme of salvation.

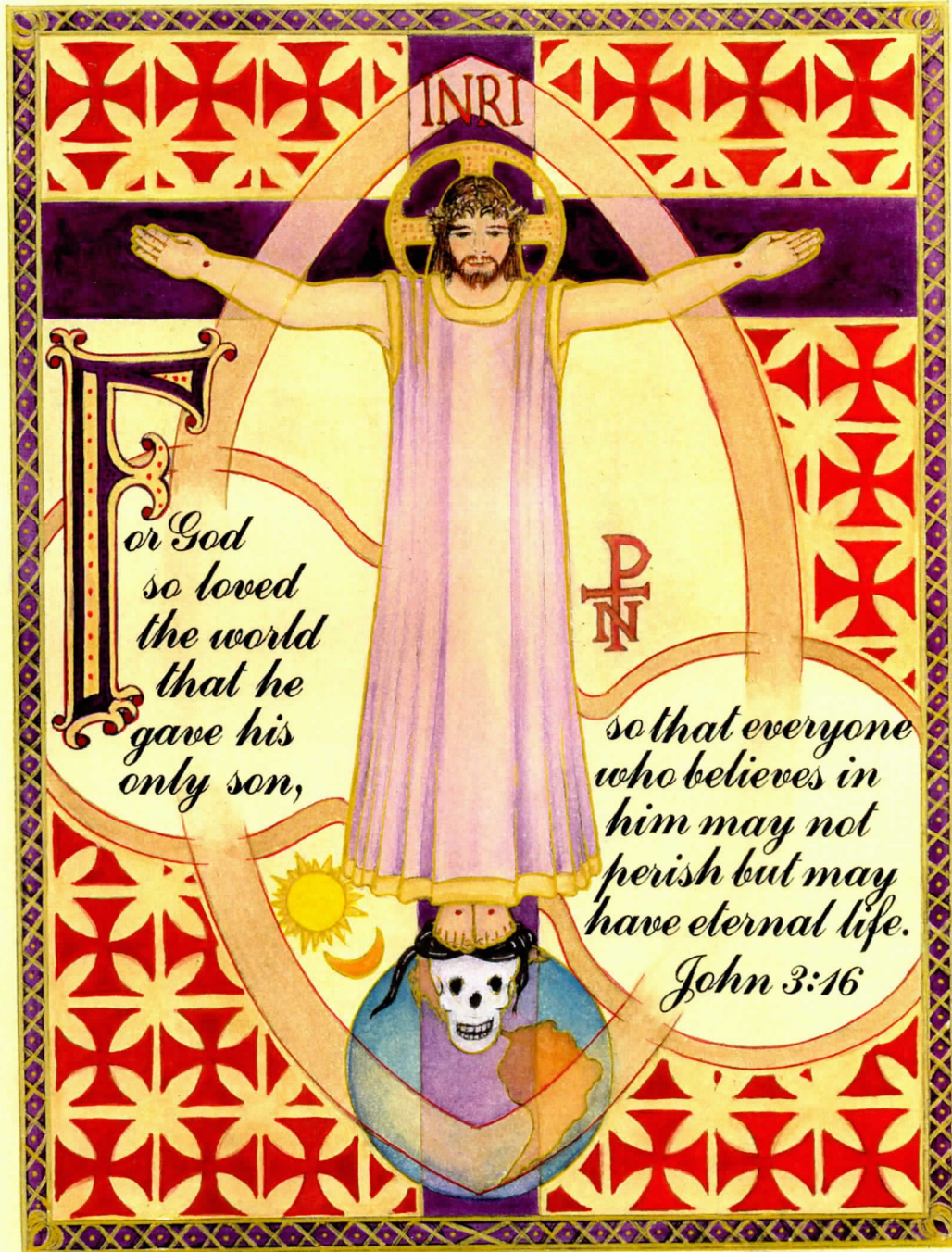
As mentioned earlier, the first Christians adapted pagan Roman meal scenes to represent the Eucharist. Images of fish and bread were also used to symbolize this sacrament. In the catacomb of Callixtus, a wall painting depicting a basket of bread on a fish is an example of this symbolic imagery from the early Christian period. A later example from a manuscript illumination in the Gospels of St. Augustine, c.600, depicts Christ with his disciples seated around a table; this was the imagery most often used during the Middle Ages to represent the Eucharist.

My painting of The Holy Eucharist is a symbolic commemoration the Last Supper and Christ's command to his disciples on that occasion. The host (bread) and wine (represented by the chalice) are representative of the body and blood of Christ. Depicted on the host is the Latin monogram for Jesus, IHS, and the chalice bears a Roman, or Latin, cross. The circular motif behind the host and chalice was designed as a type of

auricle, emphasizing the presence of Christ in the elements of the bread and wine. The lines projecting outward from the central figure are symbolic of light.

The grapes and sheaves of wheat that decorate the image are again symbolic of the body and blood of Christ. Grapes were a popular decorative motif of the Roman culture, stemming from pagan celebrations of the god of wine, Bacchus, and the Greek god Dionysus. Likewise, the wheat motif was taken from pagan harvest celebrations. A third century marble sarcophagus in the Lateran Museum, Rome, is elaborately ornamented with a grapevine motif and an image of The Good Shepherd.

A petite checkerboard pattern of two tones of gold fill the area at the base of the chalice and above the scripture. This diaper pattern enhances the composition by adding visual texture and variety.



**F**or God  
so loved  
the world  
that he  
gave his  
only son,

**DN**  
so that everyone  
who believes in  
him may not  
perish but may  
have eternal life.  
John 3:16

*August Dombke Sr.  
2000*

## THE CRUCIFIXION

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son,  
so that everyone who believes in him may  
not perish but may have eternal life.”

(John 3:16)

The Crucifixion is symbolic of the ultimate sacrifice, Christ's death upon the cross. For Christians, the salvation of mankind rests in this sacrifice. This particular scripture was selected because of its hopeful message.

Although the cross was depicted in early Christian art, the image of the crucified Christ did not appear until the fifth century. The earliest known depiction of the crucifixion in which Christ is nailed to the cross is a North Italian ivory relief carving on the side panel of a casket dating c. 420-30, now located in the British Museum, London. In this carving, nails pierce the palm of the hands, but the posture of the figure is erect and there is no evidence of suffering. The head of Christ is erect and his eyes are open. The open eyes indicate Christ's victory over death (Schiller II 91). By the ninth century a connection had been established between the death of Christ and the Incarnation: Christ's death was proof of his humanity, and thus proof of his Incarnation (Schiller II 97). As the medieval era progressed, this view was reflected in depictions of the crucifixion, for the “victorious” image gave way to images of Christ dead on the Cross. In late medieval art, images of Christ's suffering were increasingly emphasized.



The central image of my painting of The Crucifixion is derived from the early medieval image of the victorious Cross. The figure of Christ is clothed in a purple *colobium*, a garment worn by a “person of consequence” (Gough 178). By the sixth century, images of the “naked” Christ (that is, wearing a loin cloth) had become objectionable, especially in the East, and thus the colobium was added. An illuminated image from the Rabula Gospels depicts the crucified Christ adorned in this manner. The colobium was sometimes trimmed in gold to indicate the sovereignty of Christ.

The central figure of the painting is enclosed by an auroreole, sometimes called a mandorla. This enlarged nimbus signified divinity. The figure of Christ also has a tri-radiant nimbus around his head. The nimbus was a device borrowed from the Romans, who sometimes used it to adorn the images of their emperors. It was first used as a symbol of divinity for Christ during the fourth century, and was consistently used from the fifth century until the Renaissance (Jensen 112).

The figure of Christ is shown standing on a serpent, representative of evil and death, and a skull, symbolic of Adam the first man. Both of these motifs were frequently included in Crucifixion imagery during the ninth century and later, as seen in an illumination from the Echternach Gospels, c.1050, and a 1268 marble relief on a pulpit in the cathedral at Siena, by Nicola and Giovanni Pisano. The inscription above the head of Christ, INRI, is from the Latin, *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*, translated, “Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews.”

At the bottom of the painting, on the left side of the cross, a sun and moon are depicted. Images of the sun and moon were often used in early depictions of the Crucifixion, especially in the Byzantine images, as in the Rabula Gospels, 586. The sun and moon were symbols of power in the ancient world, and “in the east they probably refer to the cosmic upheavals [a solar eclipse and earthquake] which occurred at the time of the death of Christ on the Cross” (Schiller II 92).

An image of the earth showing the western hemisphere is depicted at the base of the cross. I included this modern motif to indicate that the Crucifixion of Christ is relevant today. To the right of the central figure is a monogram of Christ. This Chi Rho is combined with an N, representing NIKA or NOSTER, Latin for “Our Christ” (Post 27). The repeated motif that forms the background pattern is a form of the cross called a *Patée* (Post 65). Although this painting is figurative, it is symbolic as opposed to narrative.



*I* am the resurrection  
and the life.  
John 11:25

*Margaret Anderson 2000*

## THE RESURRECTION

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

(John 11:25)

The Resurrection is symbolic of Christ's victory over death, sin, and evil. Early depictions of the Resurrection follow the gospel accounts, and show the discovery of the empty tomb rather than the actual moment of resurrection. A fresco in the baptistry at Dura dating c.230, is an example.. One of the earliest depictions of Christ at the moment of resurrection is a tenth century illumination in the Ottonian Gospels, now located in the Cathedral Treasury at Bamberg. Christ is shown wearing a white robe, holding a scepter, and standing in the sepulcher. Depictions of the Resurrection became especially popular after the twelfth century (Schiller I 162).

In my painting of The Resurrection, the risen Christ floats in the center of the composition, free of any restraints, and the transparency of the figure was intended to add to this illusion. Behind the central figure is the Banner of Victory, often seen in images of the later medieval era with the *Agmus Dei*, which was discussed earlier.

Angels with arms raised in the orans position surround the figure of Christ. The robes of the angels are brightly patterned providing a contrast with the white robe of the central figure and also adding a sense celebration to the joyous theme of the composition. The border includes a freely flowing ribbon intended to further add to the celebratory feeling of the painting.

Positioned at the bottom center of the painting is a peacock. The peacock was a popular decorative motif in Roman culture, and it was adapted by the early Christians to symbolize the resurrection of Christ. Even before the time of Christ, the peacock was associated with themes of immortality, for a Roman myth held that “the flesh of the peacock does not decay” (Ferguson 9). In the lower right corner of the painting are Easter lilies, long associated with the resurrection because they bloom during the Easter season.

nyone who hears  
my word and  
believes him  
who sent me  
has eternal  
life and  
does not  
come under  
judgement.  
John 5:24



## THE PANTOCRATOR

“Anyone who hears my word and believes  
him who sent me has eternal life and  
does not come under judgment.”

(John 5:24)

The first Christians focused primarily on salvation, therefore, Christ’s judgment of the world was a theme not often dealt with in the very earliest days of Christianity. Scenes of judgment did occur occasionally as part of pictorial cycles carved on sarcophagi. An early example of a judgment scene is a sixth century wall mosaic at Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, showing Christ separating the goats from the sheep. This mosaic is exemplary of the simple pictorial narratives used in the early era. Christ is depicted as the Good Shepherd, with an angel on either side of him. He is gesturing with his right hand to three sheep, while three goats stand on the opposite side.

By the tenth century, Christ the Pantocrator (judge of all) was an important theme in Christian art. A large portrait of Christ in the dome of the Church of the Dormition, Daphni, c.1080-1100, depicts Christ with a “stern if not menacing expression”—a dramatic departure from the earlier images of the Good Shepherd (Snyder 153). By the late medieval era, complex depictions of The Judgment are commonplace in Christian art. Scenes were often carved on the tympanum located above the entrances to Romanesque

and Gothic cathedrals. Examples can be seen on the central portal of the west facade at Amiens, 1220-35, and on the north transept at Reims, c.1230.

In my painting of The Pantocrator, the figure of Christ is seated on a rainbow, imagery derived from Revelation (4:3), with the world as his footstool. His left hand points downward toward Hades, where a fire pit awaits the souls of the damned, and his right hand is elevated directing the souls of the faithful to their reward. To the left of Christ is an angel holding a book for him to view, and to his right, the archangel Michael is weighing souls with a scale. The realm of heaven is shown as a serene castle in the sky with angels in attendance and the Banner of Victory flowing above.

In the bottom left corner is an eagle, the symbol of St. John, gospel writer and author of Revelation, from which much of the traditional imagery of judgment scenes is derived. Decorative motifs fill the spaces where the lines of script did not extend to the edge of the border; this was a device sometimes employed by medieval illuminators to fill empty spaces in the lines of script. The cross located below the scripture is in the *Alisée Patée* style. In keeping with the underworld theme of The Judgment, I chose to frame the composition sets of bird-like creatures.





HOLY + HOLY + HOLY

HOLY + HOLY + HOLY + HOLY + HOLY + HOLY

HOLY + HOLY + HOLY + HOLY + HOLY + HOLY

**X**

*I am the Alpha and Omega,  
the First and the Last,  
the Beginning and End.  
Revelation 22:13*

*Margaret Donohue, 2000*

## CHRIST IN MAJESTY

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,

the First and the Last,

the Beginning and the End.”

(Revelation 22:13)

An early depiction of Christ as Helios (Roman sun god) in a mosaic in Mausoleum M (of the Julii) beneath Saint Peter’s Basilica, Rome, portrays Christ as the “Sun of Righteousness.” This image may be an early type of Christ in Majesty. Images of the exalted Christ appear in Christian art in the late fourth and early fifth century. An early example is a depiction of Christ enthroned, located in the apse of the Basilica of Saint Pudenziana, Rome, c.400. In this depiction Christ, with a beard and halo, adorned in a purple and gold robe, sits in a jeweled throne.

Beginning in the fourth century, the Roman imperial model was used to depict the image of Christ. This imperial depiction included Christ enthroned, in court dress, and often surrounded by the apostles. Sometimes he was shown sitting on a sphere, indicating sovereignty over the universe. An example is in the apse of Sant’ Vitale in Ravenna.

In my painting *Christ in Majesty*, the scripture expresses the eternal nature of the sovereign Christ. He sits enthroned, holding a scepter, a symbol of his sovereignty (Numbers 24:17). His right hand is raised in blessing. An aureole surrounds Christ’s body, and lines radiate outward from the aureole, suggesting light or power emanating

from the figure of Christ. In the upper right corner is a symbol composed of the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega, with a crown. The Alpha and Omega signify eternity, and combined with a crown they represent the eternal sovereignty of Christ. In the top left corner is the *Agnus Dei* with the Banner of Victory, as seen earlier in the painting of The Baptism of Christ.

A Chi Rho monogram with a crown is located in the enlarged “I” of the scripture at the bottom of the image. The four corners of the composition bear medallions with the emblems of the four authors of the gospels: Matthew, the winged man; Mark, the winged lion; Luke, the winged ox; and John, the winged eagle. Much of the tradition of the Christian Church rests upon the writings of these four men, and their symbols were often depicted in art. One example is an illuminated image of Christ in Majesty, dating 1130-40, from the Bible of Bury Saint Edmunds, Cambridge.

The word “holy” is repeated in the border to emphasize this attribute of Christ, and the purple and gold color scheme contributes to the regal theme of the composition. I intentionally simplified the composition to emphasize the central figure.

## EPILOGUE

The imagery in my paintings is simple when compared to the complexities of medieval iconography. My paintings differ from medieval models in other ways as well. Christian art produced during the Middle Ages was official Church art, and my paintings are a personal response to my faith. Additionally, my paintings were produced with modern materials, rather than those of traditional medieval illuminators. I considered using traditional materials, however, procuring vellum of lamb or calf skin is very difficult and expensive. I therefore decided that rather than use a mix of traditional and modern materials, I would make my paintings contemporary in this regard.

I have produced many works of art in the past, but the experience of painting images of Christ was different. Ideas flowed easily, and the actual painting was sheer joy; yet, I felt a weight of responsibility to produce work that conveyed a sense of dignity and reverence. I had intended to include drolleries (amusing figures) and grotesques (hybrid and comic figures) in some of the paintings, but as I progressed from one painting to the next it never seemed appropriate. I finally decided that it would be less than reverent to do so. From the beginning, I was not concerned about what others might think of my paintings. I hoped that the paintings would be interesting and visually pleasing, but I was producing the paintings for an audience of one. If my paintings provoke thought for those who do view them, that is enough.

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