

Christian fish symbol has a long history

By Michael Hickey

In the early Christian community, one of the symbols that united primitive Christians was the cross of Jesus Christ. Next to that, the ichthus, or fish symbol ranked as one of the most important in unlocking the secrets of the mystery that became Christianity.

The use of the fish symbol in pagan art was of ancient origin. Many of the mystery cults, such as the cult of Isis, had previously employed its usage. Clement of Alexandria (150 A.D.) is the first early Christian church father to have specifically mentioned the fish symbol as pertaining to Christian usage (The Pedagogue 3:11). He did not give an explanation for its use, which seems to imply that the Christian community he was writing for understood the meaning of the symbol.

This symbol first brought to mind in the fledgling Christian community the way Jesus shared a meal of fish with the disciples, on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius, in Galilee, after the resurrection (JN 21:11). But, it had a deeper, mysterious and more secret meaning.

The fish symbol references an acrostic, consisting of the initial letters of five Greek words which formed the word for "fish" in the Greek: ICTYS, pronounced ICHTHYS. It contained the Greek letters Iota, Chi, Theta, Upsilon and Sigma. To the early Christian community, this signified, "Iesous Christos, Theou Yios, Soter," or in the English translation of the Greek, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."

Several representations of the fish symbol can be found on the walls of the Catacombs. It initially enabled Christians to identify themselves to each other in secret, because they did not want to be overheard by their persecutors when they were worshiping Christ. The fish symbol enabled them to recognize each other without the need for verbal communication. They then, could jointly, but silently, proclaim their profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ.

When a Christian met a stranger on the road, one would draw one-half of the outline of the fish on a rock or in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other half, both Christian believers knew that they could enjoy fellowship and freely share their secret belief in Jesus Christ.

The fish symbol was also scratched on walls or rocks to point the way to where Christians were meeting in secret, at ever-changing locations. A similar symbol had been utilized by non-Christian Greeks at the time to mark the location of funerals, so the Christian usage blended with that one. The church father, Tertullian, would later refer to the early Christians who were being baptized as, "Little fishes, after the image of our Ichthys, born in water." (Baptism, Tert.1)

During the reign of the Emperor Constantine (307-337 A.D.), the persecution of Christians ceased, as he declared Christianity to be the official religion of the state. The fish symbol seems to have disappeared after the fourth century as Christianity spread and the secret of the "mystery fish" became more widely known to the world. It has been revitalized once more in recent times.

Silent Fishing

This can be found at: <https://archive.naplesnews.com/entertainment/christian-fish-symbol-has-a-long-history-ep-398616999-334600671.html/>

www.swsystems.com www.xdry.com