

## The Monastery Chapel Ceiling

*Text and icon photos by Bob Parrish, OblSB, September, 2023*

When we walk into the chapel at the monastery, we seldom look up. Long ago we were taught a quiet humility and to have custody of our eyes. We were not to look around and take a silent attendance of who might be coming into the worship space. Those boundaries have caused us to overlook much of the beauty of the chapel at the monastery.



The things that do vie for our attention are the stations of the cross around the room and of course the high chancel and altar. Often overlooked is the artwork set into the vaulted ceiling – twelve panels, highlighted with decorative painted borders around each section. In the center of each of the twelve segments are icons that represent the petitions of the Apostles' Creed.



In August of this year, I had a wonderful conversation with Sr. Lillian Englert, who seems to be the go-to person for this information. I'm sure many other sisters could have told me similar things around the chapel, but once I found Sr. Lillian, I looked no further.

Our conversation started in her office as I had some foundational questions that I will address here first; but soon the discussion required the "hands on" approach that only a walk around the chapel would satisfy.

### Background and history

The icons date to the initial completion of the chapel in 1924. There were several German artisans who came to the monastery for a time to do this and other interior art work. To date, no photographs have been found which might show the construction, scaffolding or painting of the interior of the chapel.

Many images which show up in the twelve circles depict long-established parts of the trinity, and some symbols tie to some of the apostles and are ancient in their origin. The symbol of the crossed keys for example, dates from the earliest of times and connects to the Apostle Peter.

In an extensive search on the Internet, I found many of the symbols, or parts thereof, seen on the ceiling. Many have long been used in the telling of the Christian understanding of our triune God. This pictorial rendering of the creed shows many of the well-established representations of statements and characters spoken of in the creed. In the main, however, these depictions and the artistic style on the chapel ceiling are unique to the Monastery of St. Gertrude.

My initial questions for Sr. Lillian began with the 1990 chapel restoration that took nearly two years to fully complete. It included the refinishing of the chancel altar structure, the antiphonal stalls, the two side altars, carpet, linoleum, and of course paint. And with that painting was the

question, what to do with the icons on the ceiling? The decision was made to not repaint them but rather to clean them and put a clear sealer over each of them. The new light-colored paint would only come to the edge of each original icon.

I want to tell the story of each of these often-overlooked icons – the Biblical connections and some of the theological understandings. With this also comes a bit of history of the Apostles' Creed. Scholars generally agree that it was a Roman baptismal creed dating to the middle of the second century. They also agree it is a combined statement of beliefs as we have them from the Apostles.

### **Heading to the chapel, looking up**

As you stand in the chapel facing the chancel and altar, the icons and the related creed petitions start at the front right and proceed to the rear of the south side of the building toward the balcony. The sequence then crosses the balcony to the north side wall and then progresses forward and ends over the left side altar showing Saints Benedict and Scholastica.

Two things are quickly observable and common to each icon: the Chi Rho symbol recurs in most, as does the color saffron. Here's a bit more about those:

Chi Rho. The Chi Rho (also known as *chrismon*) is one of the earliest images formed by superimposing the first two letters, chi and rho (**XP**), of the Greek word **ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ** (Christos) in such a way that the vertical stroke of the Rho intersects the center of the Chi.



In pre-Christian times, the Chi-Rho symbol was also used to mark a particularly valuable or relevant passage in the margin of a page, abbreviating *chrēston* (good). Some coins in the second century BCE were marked with a Chi-Rho.

Although formed of Greek characters, these two letters are also found in the Latin lexicon of the early Christian era. It is an early visual representation of the connection between the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection, which was seen commonly by the 4th century CE. The Chi-Rho symbolizes the victory of the Resurrection over death.

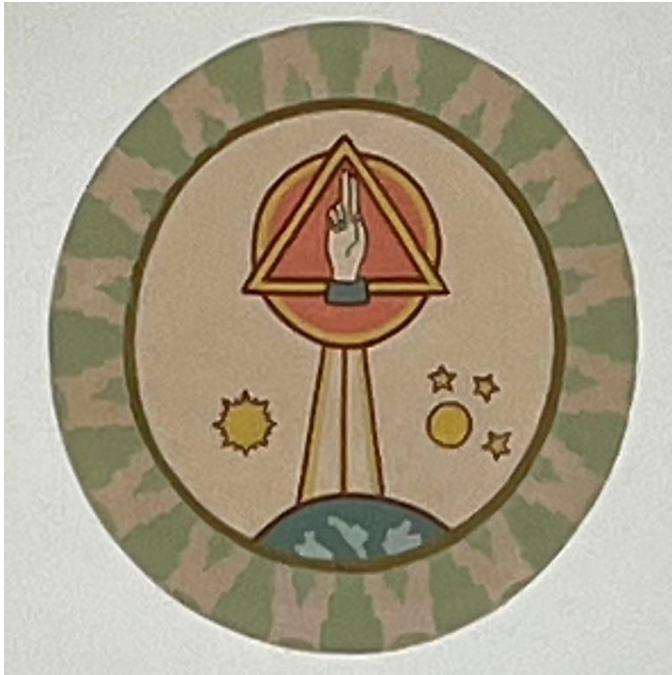
Saffron. Also seen in many of the icons is the color saffron. Saffron has been used in perfume, medicine, flavoring in food and as a dye color. It is referenced in the Old Testament book, Song of Songs 4:14. And it is used extensively in the icons around the chapel.



### **The icons, one by one**

To begin then, the various petitions will be shown in red text above the icon and a discussion from Sr. Lillian and I will follow below each icon.

*I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,*



In almost all of the icons, we see a blue hemisphere at the bottom which represents the firmament and creation. The raised hand depicts the peace and grace filled hand of the Father. Around that are stars and planetary representations of the heavens.

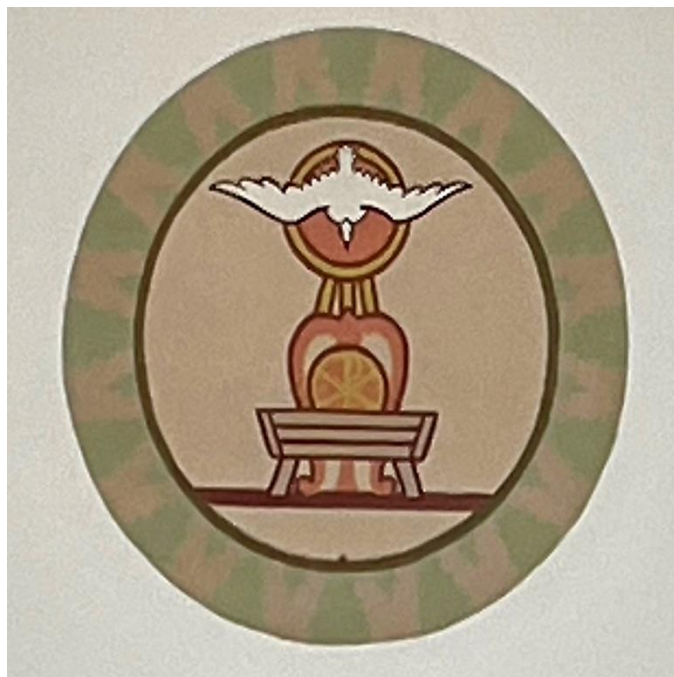
*and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,*



Here we have the representation of the cross which is our association with Jesus. The Alpha and Omega surrounding the cross connect our thinking to the Gospel of John which identifies Jesus as the Word and that Word dates to the beginning of creation.

The anchor with the entwined serpent is an ancient symbol which speaks to Christ's triumph over evil. When met with a plague of snakes, the Israelites were told to look up at the Asherah pole in the book of Numbers for their salvation in the desert. We are called to look upon Jesus for our salvation.

*who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,*



Now we see the spirit represented as a dove, descending on the Chi Rho in the manger. There is no imagery here for the virgin mother, only the Chi Rho which has already been linked to the foundations of the earth. We will see the image of the dove occur several more times as we go on.

*who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried;*

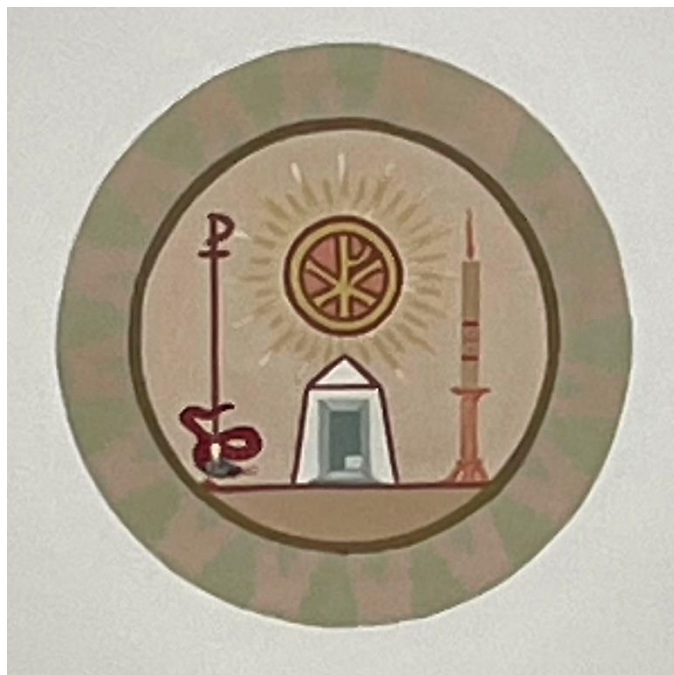


Again, we see Jesus represented as both the cross and the Chi Rho. The difference is that the inscription INRI is at the top of the cross. This is the traditional message from Pontius Pilate that Jesus is the King of the Jews.

To the left is the imagery of the authority of the Roman government over Israel and to the right is the tomb where Jesus would be placed. For now, it is shown empty and not yet used.

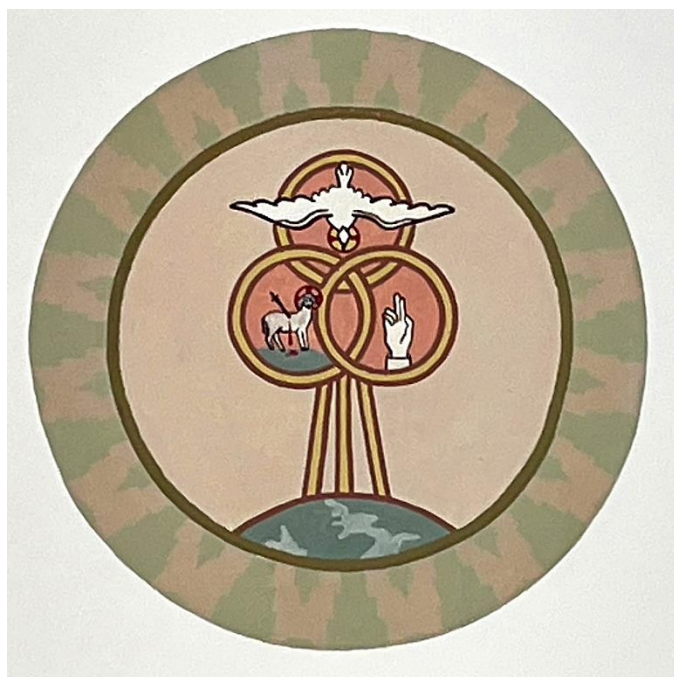


*he descended into hell;*



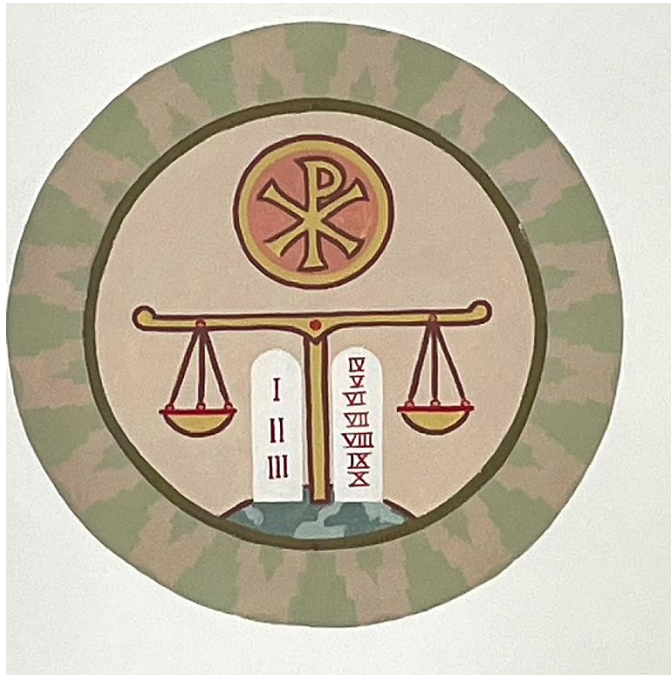
There is a lot going on with this icon. Again, the Chi Rho is at the center with light radiating to suggest that Jesus brings light to all of creation as noted in the Gospel of John. To the left we again find the image of the Asherah pole which tells the story of the snakes in the desert wilderness and became the salvation of Israel when looked upon. The deceased snake lying at the bottom speaks to the power of God, even in the wilderness. In the lower center there is the occupied tomb. To the right is the Paschal candle and the light which can never be extinguished.

*on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;*



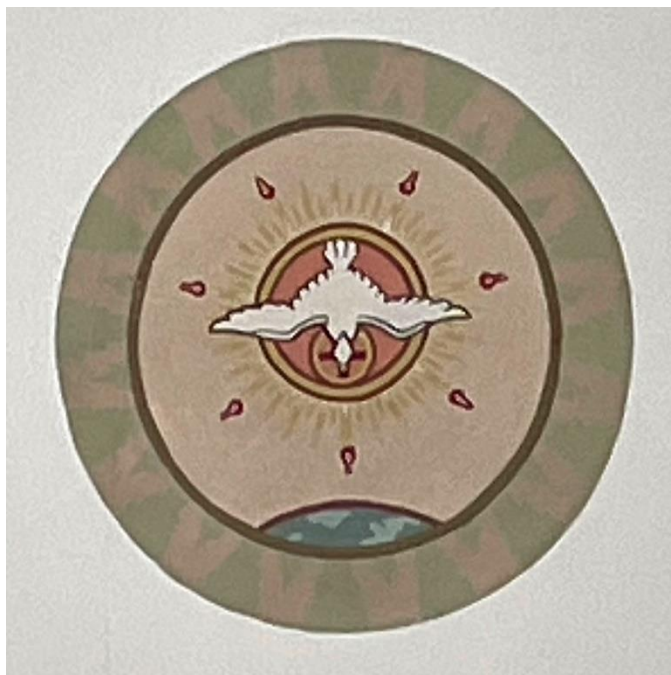
This icon speaks to the triumph of the resurrection. The symbols of the Holy Trinity gathered in one, reigning over all of creation. The Father with the hand of peace, the Son shown as the wounded lamb and the Holy Spirit shown again as a dove hovering over all; seated together as one in the joined rings of the Holy Trinity.

*from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.*



The scales of the judgement are easily picked out and include the imagery of the Ten Commandments as the foundation of that judgement. Above this is the Chi Rho which now is to be understood as showing Jesus Christ's place back in the union of the Trinity, eternally over all creation.

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,*



This is the last of the specific belief statements about the persons of the Holy Trinity – the Holy Spirit, again descending to the earth with only a hint of a cross in the dove's halo.

The radiating light is as told in the story of the baptism of Jesus. The seven oval symbols represent the seven gifts of the spirit. Those gifts are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

*the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,*



Now we begin the rest of the belief statements in the Apostle's Creed. The use of the lower case "c" in catholic, representing the universal or worldwide church, includes all of creation.

I think this particular icon contains a bit of whimsy. First the boat; could that mean that we are all in this together? There could be a whole sermon in that one by itself. The second is the small Chi Rho that is hardly seen from the floor level view in the chapel. I had seen something before taking these photos, but it has become clear now. Is this Jesus with us in the boat based on the Matthew statement that "I am with you to the end of the age"? Or, giving it my humorous spin at this

point, it could be like the story of the tempest on the sea with Jesus asleep at the tiller. Could that speak to the times where we struggle to see the hand of God in our day to day lives – to those things that befall us which are outside of what we think God would have for us?

Again, when we see the Spirit depicted overhead, we are reminded and assured by Jesus when he tells us that the Spirit will come and be with us to the end of the age. The next time you are in the chapel, see if you can find this small Chi Rho.

*the forgiveness of sins,*



The keys here are significant. In my earliest visits to the chapel, I understood the story told here. This is the symbol that is associated with St. Peter when Jesus tells him that "I give you the keys to the Kingdom, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loose in Heaven."

But superimposed over those keys is the Chi Rho, that it is Jesus who brings Peace to the earth, "My peace I give to you, my Peace I leave with you."



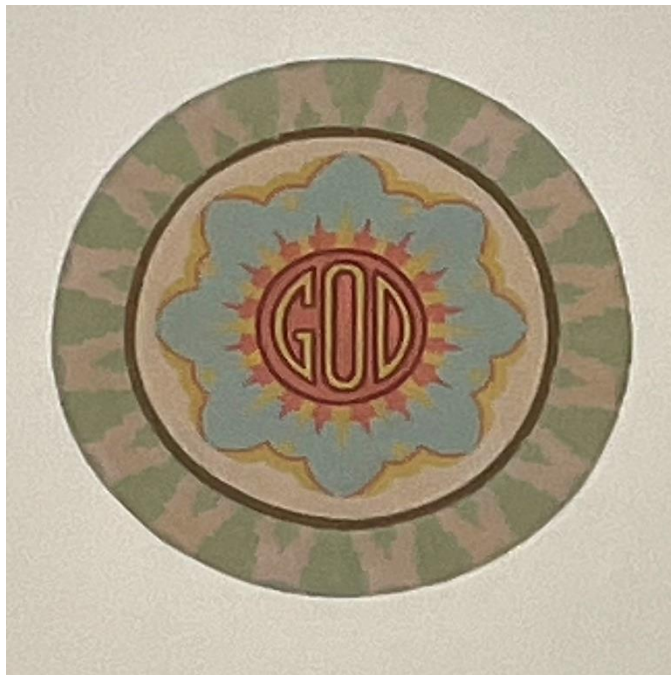
*the resurrection of the body,*



The depiction of the butterfly here offers great hope and trust at the same time. The transformation of life as seen in the butterfly. The two trumpets above the butterfly speak to the celebration of all of the heavens regarding the resurrection of the body.

Sr. Lillian told me of her special connection to this icon as she sees in the transformation of the butterfly a special connection to our resurrection. The butterfly leaping up towards the open heavens with the sounds of trumpets on the last day is clearly seen here as a celebration of the heavens for each of us.

*and life everlasting. Amen.*



With God, the life of all at the center for all of eternity.

I can only hope that the next time you come into the chapel, you stretch your personal rules and look up at these icons. They are images of our statement of belief that God is with us and in the end is triumphant.