Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

CHRISTIANITY H230/B

Crucifix



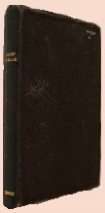
Christianity has its origin in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. A crucifix shows the suffering of Jesus as he died on the cross. Crucifixion images are used to emphasise that God, in Jesus, is not a distant being, but shares in the pain which is part of human life.

The label above Jesus' head has the letters 'INRI' on it. This is because the Gospel of John tells us that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who had Jesus killed, ordered that an inscription reading 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' should be nailed onto the cross. 'INRI' is an abbreviation of the Latin version of this inscription - 'Iesvs Nazarenvs Rex Ivdaeorvm'.

The style of this crucifix shows that it comes from the Roman Catholic tradition. The Christian church is diverse. The Orthodox (Greek speaking) and Roman Catholic churches (Latin speaking) went their separate ways in AD 1054. Protestant churches trace their origin to the protests of Martin Luther against Roman Catholic teaching and practice in 1517. Most Protestant churches only display a plain cross, without the body of Jesus.

This crucifix is part of a set which includes two candleholders and candles, and a plastic bottle to contain holy water. They would have been used together by a priest when visiting a sick person who was unable to get to church, so that the they might receive Holy Communion in their home. Holy water is water that has been blessed by a priest and which people sprinkle over themselves to seek God's favour.

Bible



The Christian Bible has two parts. The Old Testament contains those writings which Christianity shares with Judaism. The New Testament contains the Gospels - books about the life of Jesus - and other documents which derive from the earliest days of the church. This Bible is written in English. It is called the Authorized Version because it was authorized by King James I to be read in English churches in 1611. One of the disagreements between Protestants and Roman Catholics was that the Latin language was used for both worship and the Bible in the Roman Catholic church. Protestants felt this hindered ordinary people who did not know Latin from learning about Jesus. The Roman Catholic church in England started to use English in worship in the 1960s. Today all churches use English translations of the Bible, though generally more modern ones than the Authorized Version, which uses what is to most people old-fashioned English.

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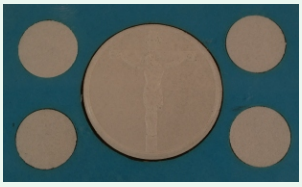
Plain Cross

This cross is made from olive wood, from the Holy Land, the place where Jesus lived. Most Protestant churches generally display a plain cross like this one, with no body displayed on it, in their places of worship.



Communion Wafers

Holy Communion, the Mass, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper are all names for an act of worship in which Christians participate in a symbolic meal of bread and wine. Jesus held such a meal on the night before he was arrested. In repeating the meal Christians look back to the events 2000 years ago, affirm their communion with each other in the present, and look forward to life in Heaven with Jesus.



The earliest such meals, which are described in the letters of Saint Paul, were clearly proper meals, in which Christians could eat their fill. Over time the meals have become purely symbolic and differences between the churches over how to celebrate them have increased.

These communion wafers belong to the Roman Catholic tradition. The larger one is held in the air by a priest and then broken as he says the words, 'On the night that he was betrayed, he broke the bread and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body which is shed for you and for many in remembrance of me'. The smaller wafers are given to the rest of the congregation. Orthodox churches use unleavened bread and Jean Calvin (1509-1564) re-introduced the practice of using ordinary loaves of bread into the Protestant tradition.

Communion Medallion

This medallion is a first communion souvenir (see the section on the Communion Veil for more information). It shows a chalice (a cup from which the wine is shared) and, at the top of the cup, a communion wafer. The same image is used on the packaging.



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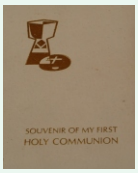
Holy Communion Souvenir Book



This book has many pictures from the 1970s of a Roman Catholic Mass in Belgium. It was produced as a souvenir for children when they took part in their first communion.

Holy Communion has always been viewed as special. In both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches children first had to be taught about Christian beliefs before being allowed to join in. There is a movement in some churches today to allow anyone of any age to freely take part in communion, as long as they have been baptised. This has always been the practice in the Orthodox church, where babies and children are given communion.

Confirmation Veil



In most churches children are baptised when they are babies. Through baptism people become members of the church. Confirmation takes place when the children have grown up enough to accept their membership of the church. The ceremony is led by the local bishop, who places his hands on the head of each child and blesses them. In the Roman Catholic church children make their first confession and communion at around 7 or 8. They are generally confirmed at 11 or 12. Girls are often dressed in white and wear a veil like this when they participate in these ceremonies.

Rosary



Prayer beads are used in many religions, probably the oldest continuing tradition being that of Hinduism. A rosary is often given to child in the Roman Catholic church at the time of their first communion. A set of Rosary beads usually contains 50 beads in groups of ten (a decade), with an additional large bead before each decade. A rosary is used to help people count their way through a sequence of prayers and meditations all of which involve reciting the Lord's Prayer, followed by ten recitations of the Hail Mary prayer: 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.'

Because Protestants reject veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, use of the rosary is rare in that tradition. Orthodox Christians tend to use a prayer rope, a woollen loop with 100 knots to help them say the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

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Communion Cups

Ways of celebrating communion differ widely from church to church and over time. One of the disputes between Roman Catholics and Protestants was whether ordinary people should be allowed to drink the wine in a communion service. Protestants believed that everyone should be allowed to receive both, but Roman Catholics had developed a practice in which ordinary people only received the bread. In the Orthodox church, on the other hand, the bread was (and is) dipped into the wine and served to the people on a spoon.



These small cups are a product of nineteenth century Free Church communion practice. (Free Churches - also called Nonconformists - are the Protestant church in England outside the official Church of England; Methodists, United Reformed and Baptists all belong to this category). They were introduced for health reasons, rather than because of theology. Tuberculosis was widespread in the nineteenth century and it was believed that sharing a chalice to drink the wine helped to spread this, and other diseases. Such small glasses do, however, allow everyone in the church to drink the wine at the same moment, rather than having to queue up and take it individually. They would also have almost certainly been used to contain non-alcoholic wine. Nonconformists were prominent in campaigning against alcohol addiction and many vowed never to drink it.

Baptism Candle



In many churches parents hold a lit candle like this to symbolise that the child has passed over from darkness to light. This candle has various symbols on it. The dove refers to Jesus's baptism in the River Jordan: 'When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."' (Luke 3.20-22). The shell beside it is also a symbol of baptism. It refers to the practice in some churches of using a shell to pour the water over the baptised child.

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Two Icons



There has always been debate in the Christian church about the place of images and statues in churches. Images of God are forbidden in Judaism and the early church strongly distinguished itself from the worship of Roman and Greek gods, who were widely represented by images and statues. In the Orthodox church all imagery was forbidden for periods in the eighth and ninth centuries. Eventually a compromise was reached and today Orthodox churches allow images, but do not allow statues.

Orthodox churches often have many images like these, known by their Greek name icons. One of these icons shows Mary and Jesus in a composition known as Our Lady of Vladimir, or the Mother of Tenderness. In icons of this type the Jesus nestles tenderly close to his mother, he gazes at her and is so closely linked to her that his left arm embraces her fully. His right hand gently touches her left cheek. The earliest known example of this type dates from the twelfth century and was commissioned in Constantinople by a Russian. In 1169, Duke Andrej Bogoljubskij had the icon brought from Kiev to the new cathedral of Vladimir. There are now thousands of representations of the Vladimir icon. It is said that there is no Orthodox Church, nor Orthodox home's religious corner, without this image somewhere represented. The second icon is similarly tender, although Jesus does not have his arm around his mother's neck as in the classic composition.

Plastic Madonna & Child and Mary Water Bottle



Mary the mother of Jesus is much venerated in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. She is viewed as an example of deep humility and tenderness. Both Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians believe that Mary, like all the other saints in heaven, continues to pray for people here on earth. Protestants do not venerate saints, including Mary, because they think worship should focus solely on Jesus, who alone will answer prayers. All Christian traditions use examples of people from the Bible and from history to teach people how to live faithful and good lives.

The plastic bottle in the shape of Mary comes from Lourdes in France. The fame of Lourdes is founded on the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to a poor, fourteen-year-old girl, Bernadette Soubiroux in 1858. Lourdes became a place of pilgrimage for the sick and water from the spring near where the visions took place is reputed to have miraculous powers of healing. Many pilgrims take some of the spring water home with them in bottles such as this one.

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Miniature Paschal Candle

Paschal means Easter. Paschal candles are lit in the first service on Easter Sunday, the day when Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. The church is often dark. A very large paschal candle is lit and then the church is filled with light as other smaller candles are lit too. The light symbolises the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Prayers are said such as, 'May the light of Christ, rising in glory, banish all darkness from our hearts and minds. The lit candle is now a symbol of Christ, risen as the light of the world, and come into the midst of the people.' This small paschal candle has the letters Alpha (A) and Omega (Ω), the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, on it. This refers to the Risen Jesus who, in the last book of Bible, is referred to in these terms ('I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End', Revelation 22.13).

Charcoal and Frankincense





Frankincense the dried sap from a tree which grows in East Africa and Arabia - is melted, using charcoal, in Roman Catholic, Orthodox and some Protestant church such as the Church of England. As it melts it gives off clouds of sweet smelling smoke. The sweet scents heighten the experience of worshipping in church and are often taken as symbolic of the prayers of the people which are offered to God.

Alpha and Omega Plaque

Jesus, in the last book of bible, is referred to as the Alpha and the Omega ('I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End', Revelation 22.13). This sign for Christ can also be seen on the Paschal candle in this box.

Fish Badge



Christians often wear a fish badge like this, or have it on their cars or houses. The fish was used a symbol of Christian faith well before Christianity became the official Roman religion in the fourth century. It was used because the phrase 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour' in Greek is written 'Ιησους Χριστος Θεου Υιος Σωτηρ'. The first letter of each of these five words spells ΙΧΘΥΣ, which means 'fish' in Greek. This word is written down the centre of this badge.