

mundi." From the fifth century the head of the lamb began to be encircled by the nimbus. Several monuments also show the lamb with its head surmounted by various forms of the Cross; one monument discovered by de Vogüé in Central Syria shows the lamb with the Cross on its back.

The next step in the development of this idea of associating the Cross with the lamb was depicted in a sixth-century mosaic of the Vatican Basilica which represented the lamb standing on a throne, at the foot of a Cross studded with gems. From the pierced side of this lamb, blood flowed into a chalice whence again it issued in five streams, thus recalling Christ's five wounds. Finally, another sixth-century monument, now forming part of the ciborium of St. Mark's, Venice, presents a crucifixion scene with the two thieves nailed to the cross, while Christ is represented as a lamb, standing erect at the junction of the crossbeams. One of the most interesting monument showing the Divine Lamb in various characters is the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (d. 358). In four of the spandrels between the niches of raising Lazarus, by means of a rod, from the tomb; being baptized by another lamb, with dove dominating the scene; multiplying loaves, in two baskets, by the touch of a rod; joining three other lambs.

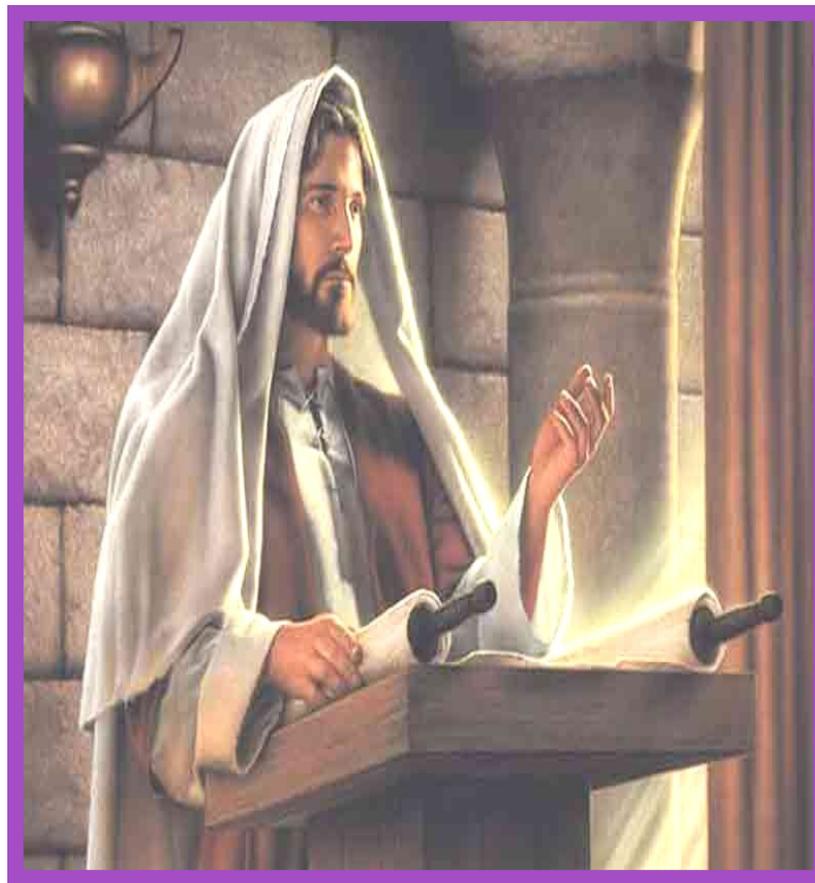


El Buen Pastor,  
by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, c. 1660

Two other scenes show a lamb receiving the Tables of the Law on Mount Sinai and striking a rock whence issues a stream of water. Thus in this series, the lamb is a symbol, not only of Christ, but also of Moses, the Baptist, and the Three Children in the fiery furnace. The fresco the cemetery of Praetextatus, showing Susanna as a lamb between two wolves (the elders), is another example of the lamb as symbol of one of the ordinary faithful.



## **S E R M O N O N** **THE LAMB IN EARLY CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM** **FROM THE FATHER'S OF THE CHURCH** **# 151 - 1**



***JESUS, OUR FIRST PREACHER!***

***SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER***

## The Lamb (in Early Christian Symbolism)

One of the few Christian symbols dating from the first century is that of the Good Shepherd carrying on His shoulders a lamb or a sheep, with two other sheep at his side. Between the first and the fourth century eighty-eight frescoes of this type were depicted in the Roman catacombs.

The signification which may be attached to this symbol, according to Wilpert's interpretation, is as follows. The lamb or sheep on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd is a symbol of the soul of the deceased being borne by Our Lord into heaven; whereas the two sheep accompanying the Shepherd represent the saints already enjoying eternal bliss.

This interpretation is in harmony with an ancient liturgical prayer for the dead of the following tenor: "We pray God . . . to be merciful to him in judgment, having redeemed him by His death, freed him from sin, and reconciled him with the Father. May He be to him the Good Shepherd and carry him on His shoulders [to the fold] May He receive him in the following of the King, and grant him to participate in eternal joy in the Society of the saints" (Muratori, "Lit. Rom. Vet.", I, 751). In catacomb frescoes this petition is represented as already granted; the deceased is in the company of the saints.

Another cycle of catacomb paintings (not numerous) represents a lamb, or a sheep, with a milk-pail either on its back or suspended from a pastoral staff. A unique fresco of this order shows a shepherd milking a sheep, while still another shows milk-pail on an altar between two sheep. The frescoes of this type (of the sheep and milk-pail) were, until recently, generally regarded as symbols of the Eucharist, but Mgr. Wilpert dissents from the received opinion, and regards all frescoes in which allusions to milk occur as symbolic of the joys of Heaven. Both the earlier and the later interpretations depend on a well-known text of the Acts of SS. Perpetua and Felicitas. While in prison awaiting martyrdom, St. Perpetua tells us she beheld in a vision an immense garden, and in the center thereof the tall and venerable figure of an old man in the dress of a shepherd, milking a sheep. Raising his head, he looked at me and said, 'Welcome, my daughter.' And he called me to him and he gave me of the milk. I received it with joined hands and partook of it. And all those standing around cried 'Amen'. And at the sound of the voice I awoke, tasting an in-describable sweetness in my mouth." The community of ideas between this description and the catacomb frescoes of the sheep and milk-pail is so apparent that, at first view, the current interpretations of this class of representations would seem to be obviously accurate. Wilpert, however, calls attention to the fact that the things described in the vision of St. Perpetua

took place not on earth, but in heaven, where the Eucharist is no longer received. Hence he regards the frescoes of the milk-pail class as symbolic of the joys which the soul of the deceased possess in paradise

The lamb, or sheep, symbol, then, of the first class described, has, in all catacomb paintings and on sarcophagi of the fourth century, always a meaning associated with the condition of the deceased after death. But in the new era ushered in by Constantine the Great the lamb appears in the art of the basilicas with an entirely new signification. The general scheme of apsidal mosaic decoration in the basilicas that everywhere sprang into existence after the conversion of Constantine, conformed in the main to that described by St. Paulinus as existing in the Basilica of St. Felix at Nola. "The Trinity gleams in its full mystery", the saint tells us. "Christ is represented in the form of a lamb; the voice of the Father thunders from heaven; and through the dove the Holy Spirit is poured out. The Cross is encompassed by a circle of light as by a crown. The crown of this crown are the apostles themselves, who are represented by a choir of doves. The Divine unity of the Trinity is summarized in Christ. The Trinity has at the same time its own emblems; God is represented by the paternal voice, and by the Spirit; the Cross and the Lamb denote the Holy Victim. The purple background and the palms indicate royalty and triumph. Upon the rock he stands Who is the Rock of the Church, from which flow the four murmuring springs, the Evangelists, living rivers of Christ" (St. Paulinus, "Ep. xxxii, ad Severum", sect. 10, P.L. LXI, 336). The Divine Lamb was usually represented in apsidal mosaics standing on the mystic mount whence flow the four streams of Paradise symbolizing the Evangelists; twelve sheep six on either side, were further represented, coming from the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem (indicated by small houses at the extremities of the scenes) and proceeding towards the lamb. The lower zone, no longer in existence, of the famous fourth-century mosaic in the church of St. Pudenziana, Rome, originally represented the lamb on the mountain and probably also the twelve sheep; the existing sixth-century apse mosaic of SS. Cosmas and Damian at Rome gives a good idea of the manner in which this subject was represented.

According to the "Liber Pontificalis", Constantine the Great presented to the Lateran baptistery, which he founded, a golden statue of a lamb pouring water which was placed between two silver statues of Christ and St. John the Baptist; the Baptist is represented holding a scroll inscribed with the words: "Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata