

THE MOSAIC IN THE APSE OF SAINT CLEMENT IN ROME

FROM THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK TO THE TREE OF LIFE



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Historical framework

The church of Saint Clement in Rome offers four distinct archeological levels, among which there is a celebrated Mithraeum from the third century, and an early Christian church already cited by Saint Jerome in 385. The current basilica was instead constructed at the beginning of the twelfth century, under the pontificate of Pope Pascal II. It is in reality a “reconstruction” by Roberto il Guiscardo from the ruins left after the destruction of Rome in 1084. The sources tell us that in 1106 the cardinal Anastasio, owner of the basilica, had already set to work. Over the next decade the apse mosaic was executed, modeled on that of the early Christian era. By analyzing the type of preparation of the gold tiles, some critics have noted the reuse of pieces of the ancient collapsed mosaic.

We are therefore in the presence of a medieval work that attempts to revive a model from earlier centuries. In fact, the early Christian plan is easily recognizable. The structure and the fundamental symbols are part of the grammar with which artists from the third to sixth centuries were able to give new pagan forms of “Christ say” to man of the late Empire. This process of “trans-signification” of artistic forms is a true “enculturation” and belongs to the dynamics of the Incarnation itself. For the Fathers, from the moment in which human flesh is able to “be God,” then all expressions of man’s culture can be used to express the mystery of God incarnate.

But on an early Christian structure, the mosaics of the twelfth century give to Saint Clement typical elements of the Middle Ages, like Mary and John flanking the cross, or the characters “nested” on scrolls of the large acanthus plant which fills the apse. The final result of these integrations is our mosaic, an eminent theological example of “Gregorian reform.” From the middle of the eleventh century, Gregory VII, supported by Cluny and by great founders like Romauld of Ravenna, had promoted a creative return to these sources for the renovation of the Church.

The writing that flows at the base of the apse in fact provides a key to the ecclesiastical reading of the entire mosaic. The text marked in white tiles on the

dark background begins with the words “Ecclesiam C(h)risti viti simulabimus isti” (“to this vine we will compare the Church of Christ”). The entire iconographic program proposes Gregorian images of the Church as a vine born from the cross of Christ and where men of every condition and social range nest.

The symbolism of the materials

The same inscription at the base of the basin continues, indicating that in the representation of the body of Christ there were inserted, next to the tiles of the mosaic, relics of the holy cross and of Saint James and Ignatius of Antioch. The mosaic reveals itself not as a simple work of art but as a true relic. To observe the apse of Saint Clement is not to simply observe representations. The believer finds himself in front of real wood of salvation and of real bodies; bodies of martyrs who have borne witness to the risen Christ and who gave birth to the Church. The contemplation of this mosaic coincides exactly with the liturgy called to take place in this space. It makes the believer “truly present” at Golgotha, at the wood of the cross. But this “real presence” is no longer lived in the disruption and in the fear of Good Friday, but is celebrated by the witness of the risen Christ, gathered in the living Church. The liturgy is a real presence of the cross and at the same time the feast of the Resurrection. It is this feast which constitutes the Church. The relics of martyrs mixed with other pieces of the mosaic are to say that they are only the beginning of a long series and that each one of the other tiles represents for each one of us the promise of becoming like them.

In this way, the original inspiration of the early Christian mosaic is recovered. To cover the surface of a sacred space with these colored and gilded tiles is to give an image of the Christian community as a communion of “precious stones” of different colors which together form the “heavenly Jerusalem,” according to the description of chapter 21 of Revelation.

In the Hebrew language, there exists assonance between the word “stone” (aven) and the word “son” (b’n). To speak of stones of a house becomes a metaphor for speaking of “sons” of a “family”. Each human being is as such represented like a “precious son,” chosen with great care because his specific color is necessary for

the beauty of the whole. The same desperate search of the mosaic artists who sometimes go to search for rare stones in distant yards becomes the image of the race of the Good Shepherd who goes to take away the sheep, or the image of desire of a God who has chosen his sons with infinite care. In addition, compared to the smooth mosaics of Roman antiquity, the Christian mosaic artist places his tiles on a surface of irregular mortar. The point is to highlight further that each golden tile reflects the light in a different way. The “vocation” of each “stone,” of each son, is to reflect the light according to its own specific way.

Image of Easter

One can interpret the mosaic of Saint Clement as a series of “theological layers” which reveal the history of salvation, which is synthesized in the Easter event and present in the Eucharistic liturgy.

The first “layer” is the gold background. The tradition of the gold background is typical of medieval Byzantine art and dates back to the early Christian period. The gold background of the mosaics will become the background of Greek and Russian icons and will mark another two hundred years in Italy.

The gold immediately recalls the light of the countenance of God. In many cultures, light is the first metaphor of the divine. Like God, the light cannot be seen, but it is what allows you to see. The light is that which makes things appear, pulled from the darkness, just as God makes his creations “be,” pulled out of the “non-being.” From the Incas to the ancient Egyptians, from Buddha to the Aztecs, it is the ray of solar light that unites heaven and hell. It is “materialized” for example in the obelisks.

Through the Neo-Platonic philosophy, this metaphor enters fully in Christian theology, already well disposed to a biblical tradition where light is the symbol of the Word. “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path,” sings the Psalm 119 (Psalm 119:105). It is interesting to note that the first words of God in the Bible are “Let there be light” (Gen1:3). Jesus himself affirms “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12). For the Fathers to pray they are situated under the light, letting

themselves be illuminated by God, letting themselves “be.” To pray before the gold mosaic is to recognize oneself as one of the gold tiles which form the great image of the whole creation.

But gold is also an ancient symbol of fidelity. Because it is a strong and durable metal, it is used in the symbols of the covenant. To pray before a gold surface is to pray before the faithful background of God who creates a covenant. This awareness is the door to prayer for many great spiritual teachers of the East and West. Saint Teresa of Avila will say: “when you pray, look how lovingly He is watching you; this is the door to prayer.”

In Saint Clement, gold covers the entire surface, which is the image of creation; a way of saying that God’s beauty covers all of creation. The eyes of those who enter the church, attracted by the glimmering of the apse, can retrace the entire mosaic surface and find light. “In your light we see light,” says Psalm 35. The glimmering of the creatures reflects the invisible light of the creator. Each individual creature reflects this light. There is, however, an exception. In the geometric center of the mosaic stands a completely different surface. This contrasts brutally with the gold of creation. It is the cross. The mosaic artists represented it with a dark blue color. It is a sort of abyss. And it coincides exactly with the central axis of the mosaic, that is, with the area where the eyes end up following the “slope” of the curve of the apse. This abyss of the cross “breaks” the smooth surface of the mosaic and catches the eye as a sort of “black hole.”

In his study on “The Spiritual in Art,” (Munich 1910), Vassily Kandinsky showed that the color yellow-gold instinctively recalls physicality and closeness. Its opposite is dark blue which conveys a sense of abstraction and removal. A dark blue surface “retracts;” it evokes an elusive endlessness. Applied to our mosaic, we can say that the entire creation is “physicality” of God, expressing his closeness. In the center of creation, however, like a deep wound, it outlines an abyss, a crack in the shape of a cross. It is the emblem of evil, the place where creation is “broken.” It is the place where creation does not any longer reflect the light of God. And it is precisely in this place where our eyes fix themselves,

irresistibly attracted by evil. The “problem of evil” is the focal point of the mosaic. The “black hole” of the spirit.

“My sin is ever before me,” says David in Psalm 51. The sin, the evil, is what “drains” all spiritual energy from man. The dark blue abyss captures the eyes of the heart and prevents contemplation of the gold of creation. In this “crack of creation” is hidden the wounded man and the sinner, like the dove of Canticle, hidden “in the cleft of the rock.” In Canticle, the dove is the gaze of the beloved (Ct 1:15, 4:1) but is also the beloved himself (Ct 6:9). Therefore, the mosaic artists of Saint Clement placed inside this abyss twelve doves. These represent the twelve apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel; the entire people. The eyes attracted by the abyss have plunged into the cleft of the rock and now cannot leave. Then the beloved calls: “O my dove that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places in the cliff” (Ct 2:14a).

The voice of God reaches to the depths of sin and, as the Fathers say, “goes to disturb the solitude of the dinner,” who would remain alone in his hiding place. This voice of Love is the Word itself. This calls the sinner to retrieve his dignity: “let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is lovely” (Ct 2:14b). But the sinner does not leave from his shame. Then the lover himself decides to enter in shame, in the abyss of evil, but to find communion with his beloved. It is the story of Jesus of Nazareth; the story of a God who enters into death, to restore to man a face and a voice.

It can be said that in the verse of Canticle the call of the lover covers the infinite distance between God and the sinner. It is a call of infinite tenderness. It is love itself. This call is not a simple breath of voice. This call is a Word made of flesh. It is Jesus Christ. He is God who covers each distance and who penetrates in the depths of death to be with “his doves.” It is the story of a God “made from sin,” (cf. 2Cor 5:21) in order to restore communion with the sinner.

So he who fixes his gaze in the bottom of the apse in Saint Clement, because it is “captured by sin,” finds himself in front of the Savior. Love has taken the place of sin. He has filled the gap. The Christian experience is precisely this: to remember

his own sin and in the place of seeing this sin, discover the love of God. Because man always watches his own sin, God decides to enter in sin to always be watched by man. To discover the cross of Christ is to discover God in the depths of His own sin. There where one would like to plunge, there where one is ashamed, there He manifests His Lordship.

This strong message of the mosaic of Saint Clement is confirmed by the symbolism which we discover at the foot of the cross. In the same place where the vertical apse of the cross is “planted,” under the acanthus bush which hides its base, the mosaic artists represented a small deer whose nose grazes a kind of red ribbon in the shape of a snake. This is probably the resumption of an early Christian symbol whose precise significance is no longer evident for mosaic artists of the twelfth century. Ancient Christianity had recorded in the book of Physiologus the allegorical meaning of many animals, often reproduced in figurative art of the first centuries. One of these allegories was that of the deer. Ancient pagan man was struck by the thirst for this animal, able to swallow enormous amounts of water. The pseudo-scientific conviction was then born that the motive for this thirst was the fact that deer eat serpents and that the venom of serpents demanded large amounts of water to be neutralized. The symbolic Christian tradition has recovered this conviction, interpreting it in an allegorical way: we are all like deer because we all have swallowed the serpent of sin which has poisoned life; but this venom urges us to seek water that is grace, that is Christ himself. Early Christianity had interpreted Psalm 42 which begins with the words: “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, o God.” This Psalm led to the beginning of baptismal liturgy, when during the Easter Vigil, the catechumens advance in procession toward the water of baptism which is the grace for which they yearn.

In the primitive early Christian mosaics of Saint Clement, what is now a red garland whose meaning is indecipherable was probably a serpent swallowed by a deer, represented at the foot of the cross. There are numerous iconographic early Christian parallels which show deer swallowing a serpent and/or drinking the water of life. The cross of our mosaic is therefore planted exactly at the point

where the sin is committed, at the point where the deer swallows the poisonous snake. And then it is not a coincidence if, just below, we see two deer of larger dimensions, symmetrically positioned, who drink at four rivers which seem to flow from the foot of the cross. They are the four rivers of paradise, according to the story in Genesis 2. It is precisely the place where sin becomes a place of grace. It is because the deer has swallowed the serpent that it can now drink from the four rivers of paradise. The cross of Christ has transformed the place of sin into paradise.

And now it is easy to understand the last “layer” of this iconographic narration. From the foot of the cross comes a bush which fills all the available space, all of the earth. In the original early Christian mosaic, it is without doubt an acanthus plant. The acanthus in ancient pagan symbolism was the plant of victory. Its thorns recalled the sufferings of combat and its intense aroma recalled the pleasure of victory. It was also an evergreen plant used in particular in the decorations of Corinthian capitals to signify the “garden of eternal spring.” Early Christianity took over this symbol for Easter. The acanthus is the plant of death (thorns) and of Resurrection (aroma). In the Greek text of the Gospel, the crown of the crucified Christ is a crown of “*akanthos*.” (cf. Jn 19:2)

For our mosaic artists, the dead and resurrected Christ has transformed all of creation, shattered by sin, in the garden of victory. The volutes are exactly fifty, in Greek “*Pentecoste*.” It is the sum of the fulfillment of the Spirit which fills the whole space and brings the Church to the final boundaries. The liturgy itself is first of all an effusion of the Spirit. In the bread and in the wine, of course. But also in the assembly and even the whole world. For the Fathers, the Eucharist is the gateway through which Creation becomes (or becomes again) the real presence of God. The mosaic of Saint Clement describes the liturgy of the Eucharist as the New Creation wrought by the “Creator Spirit.”

Fifty is also the biblical sum of the Jubilee Year, the year of the remission of debts and of the return to the earth, the year of liberation of the slaves. The New

Testament presents Jesus as “the year of grace of the Lord” (Lk 4:19), the definitive Jubilee Year, the eternal Pentecost.

But above all, these fifty volutes make from the cross a tree which fills the universe. The cross becomes the tree of life. Planted in the center of the garden, this now holds the universe, unities the sky and the earth. That is to say, the space of creation is the place to have an amazing experience: what had been the sin of Adam, eating from the tree in the middle of the garden, becomes now the greatest communion with God, from the moment that Christ himself became that fruit hanging from the tree. As early as the third century we can read in a text attributed to Hippolytus Romanus (Homily on Easter Sunday, 50s):

“This wood appears to me for my eternal salvation. It nourishes me, grazing there, I consolidate in its roots. [...] I flourish with its flowers; its fruits cause me a perfect enjoyment, fruit which I collect, prepare for me from the beginning of the world. For my hunger I find there a delicate food; for my thirst, a fountain; for my nudity, a dress; its leaves are a vivifying Spirit [...]. Here Jacob’s ladder where the angels rise and descend up to there where is the Lord [...]. This tree which stretches so far up to the heavens ascends from the earth to the sky. Immortal plant, standing in the center of the sky and of the earth: strong support of the universe, bonds all things, support of the entire inhabited earth, the cosmic web which comprises in itself all the diversity of human nature.”

And contemporary to the early Christian mosaic of Saint Clement, an anonymous text attributed to Giovanni Crisostomo (Homily on Psalm 1) resumes:

“He then is also the tree planted by the rivers, which the Father has generated – without any mediator – fruitful, abundant of fruit, lush, of high foliage, of beautiful branches. [...] You want to see also the fruit which this [tree] has given in its time?

Watch this crucified fruit and his pierced side, from which gushes blood and water, the blood to indicate the martyr, the water as a symbol of baptism. Since in fact the pierced side ruined Adam, it was necessary that the pierced side regenerate. A green wood felled one, a dry wood lifted the world. To have eaten from that which caused death is to eat from that which rebirths life. From that it was said: Don't eat any of it, from this instead: Taste and see that the Lord is good. [...] It is beautiful how an apple is sweet as wine, fertile as an olive, specious as pomegranate, bearing as palm, mature as a grape. Taste and see. The fruit is on the cross: it flourished among the patriarchs, blossomed among the prophets, gave aroma in those coming, matured in passion, is eaten after the resurrection. Taste and see how sweet, how strong, how mature, how flourishing, how full of beauty."

It is interesting to note that the medieval mosaic artists have transformed this tree, from early Christian acanthus into vines. If the leaves at the base of the cross recall the acanthus again, scrolls indeed have the acanthus flower but the stem of the vine. An image is resumed which in the Old Testament symbolized Israel (Is 5) and in the New Testament represented Christ himself and his Church. This piece of reference, which inspires the inscription annotated at the beginning, is Jn 15. When Christ says to his disciples "I am the vine; you are the branches" (Jn 15:5), He underlines the vital union between himself and his community. It is this intimate union to Christ which the twelfth century Church wants to rediscover.

The Church of Gregory VII finds itself in the situation of having to "cut the dry branches." But it also sees generous grapes grow, in theological study, in the renovation of religious life, in the same organization of daily life of Christians. Therefore, mosaic artists of the twelfth century have represented in bunches of grapes the most varied figures of medieval society, from the scholar to the peasant, from the pastor to the traveler. But also: Mary, mother of the Church,

the loved disciple, the doctors of the Church, the symbolic fauna, the birds in the sky... The whole tree of the cross became an image of the parable of the mustard seed to which Christ compares the Kingdom of God: "This is the smallest of all seeds, but once it is grown, it is bigger than all the other garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds from the sky come and make their nests in its branches."

Also noteworthy is that this seed bears abundant fruit because it dies. "If the seed falls to the ground it does not die..." (cf. Jn 12:24). And precisely because it dies it receives the prize of victory and the Lordship of the universe. In its capacity to give life exists the cosmic Lordship. It is what the top of the apse indicates. This part of the mosaic represents an open sky and a curtain extended to the measure of all of creation. "Behold, the curtain of God with men! He will live with them," says the Book of Revelation when it describes heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:3). The spectacle described so far of the mosaic in the apse of Saint Clement is revealed in a final analysis as the reinterpretation of heavenly Jerusalem. The Church, symbolized by the church, is that curtain of "God with us," which coincides with the whole of creation. For the Fathers, as for some texts of the New Testament (cf. Col 1, 15-20), the Church is the final purpose of the whole of Creation.

Just above the cross, in the space of the "open sky," between the golden surface and the "curtain of heaven," we can distinguish the hand of God which gives the child a crown. It is an iconographic scene well known in early Christian art. It is highlighting that "God raised Jesus," according to perhaps the most ancient formula in the proclamation of Easter morning. In the last analysis, the crown is the relationship which occurs between Father and Son, that is, the Spirit. This scene frames the entire work in a frame of the Holy Trinity. The whole of Creation, like the whole of the Church, is born from the relation between Father and Son from which Easter is the greatest celebration of the Eucharist and its "curtain," its "house of precious stone."



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