CHAPTER THREE

BAPTISMAL ICONOGRAPHY IN IVORY, GLASS, AND MOSAIC

Introduction: Transformation of Christian Visual Art in the
Fourth and Fifth Centuries

The fourth-century church’s transformation from an illicit minority
sect into a religion patronized by the Roman emperor and other elites
is reflected in the changing content, style, and quality of its visual art.
No longer primarily private or sepulchral, the extant monuments,
from this point on, include extensive (and impressive) public dis-
plays. Monumental mosaic apse and nave programs adorned the new
churches built with funds drawn upon the imperial fisc or funded by the
inherited family wealth of a new Christian aristocracy.163 Individuals,
laypersons and clergy, commissioned costly devotional and liturgical
objects (including illuminated manuscripts) for personal use as well
as church treasuries.

According to the Liber Pontificalis, Constantine alone endowed the
Lateran basilica with a huge number of priceless and beautiful fur-
nishings, including a hammered silver fastigium (an interior columned
pediment that separated the nave from the apse area) weighing more
than 2,000 pounds. This object was decorated on both sides (facing
both apse and nave). The front showed Christ seated among the twelve
apostles; the back had Christ enthroned and flanked by spear-carrying
angels. From this fantastic object, four golden crowns were suspended
along with a gold lamp adorned with fifty golden dolphins.164

163 For example, Paulinus of Nola decorated his basilica-shrine dedicated to Felix
with paintings in order to attract pilgrims inside to worship. See Paulinus, Carm. 27.
164 Lib. pont., (Sylvester) 34.9. On this object see Sible de Blaauw, "Imperial Con-
notations in Roman Church Interiors: The Significance and Effect of the Lateran Fas-
tigium," in Imperial Art as Christian Art, Christian Art as Imperials art: Expression
and Meaning in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Justinian: Acta ad archaeo-
logiam et artium historiam pertinentia 15 (Rome: Institutum Romanum Norvigea,
2001), 137–46; and Sible de Blaauw, "Das Fastigium der Lateranbasilika: Schöpferische
Innovation, Unikat oder Paradigma?" in Innovation in der Spätantike: Kolloquium
The emperor also ensured that the walls, ceiling, and floors of his basilica would be lavishly ornamented with gilded beams, colorful marble pavements (opus sectile), and a mosaic in the apse. This application of colored small tesserae to walls and vaults was a technical innovation, replacing the painted walls of the previous era. An image placed in this large curved space would have replaced the cult statue in earlier Roman basilicas. Rather than the idol-like dominance of a three-dimensional figure, the Christian church developed the two-dimensional, but yet curved and glittering glass mosaic, making the apse an architectural and a liturgical focal point, as well as a place for artistic experimentation.

Although Constantine’s apse may not have had figural decoration, a bust of Christ surrounded by angels was added sometime in the early fifth century. When this original was destroyed centuries ago, it was replaced by a mosaic presumably based upon it. The upper portion shows the bust of Christ surrounded by angels. Below, a gemmed cross rises from a rocky mound from which spring the four Edenic rivers. Deer and sheep drink from these living waters (a reference to Psalms 23 and 41). Saints stand to the right and left looking toward the cross. A river, populated with sea life, boats, and fishing cherubs flows across the bottom, a possible allusion to the Jordan as a passage to Paradise.165

St. Peter’s apse (probably completed by Constantine’s son Constans) was destroyed in the thirteenth century, but, based on external evidence and the decoration of certain pilgrimage objects, scholars have surmised that it showed Christ handing a scroll of the law to Peter and Paul—the traditio legis. In general, the narrative iconography found on third- and early fourth-century relief sculpture gradually gave way to dogmatically oriented motifs, such as an ascended and enthroned Christ among his apostles.

While this development of new venues, funds, and patrons for Christian art was underway, the Roman catacombs were themselves largely abandoned as places for ordinary burials and, especially during Damasus’ pontificate, began to be converted into shrines for the veneration of the martyrs, saints, and bishops buried within. These shrines’ decoration inspired a new type of Christian iconography—