A Memorable Exhibition on Early Christian Art

In 2007 and 2008 a splendid exhibition on early Christian Art was staged at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth (Texas), entitled *Picturing the Bible.* The exhibition explored the tradition of Christian art from its beginnings in the third century CE, when Christianity had a clandestine status, through the fourth century, when it became the state religion of the Roman Empire, and into the Byzantine phase of the sixth century, when imperial power was based in Constantinople. The exhibit received impressive loans from major museums in America, Europe, and North Africa. Some of the objects, especially those from the Vatican Museums in Rome and the Archaeological Museum in Algiers, had never traveled before and provided the American audience with a rare chance to view them. The event also offered a unique opportunity for students in the region to study these objects closely, without having to travel to far-away and often difficult-to-reach places. An extensive catalogue accompanied the exhibit.

* This paper was given by invitation as a lecture at a two-day symposium at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, dedicated to the functions of Christian art, including its use in the formation of Christian self-identity. The symposium was moderated by the curator of the exhibition, Jeffrey Spier of the University of Arizona, Tucson.

1 *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art: An Exhibition at the Kimbell Art Museum,* Fort Worth, November 18, 2007–March 30, 2008. Catalog of the exhibition by Jeffrey Spier, with contributions by Mary Charles-Murray, Johannes G. Deckers, Steven Fine, Robin M. Jensen, and Herbert L. Kessler.

Based on insights from recent archaeological discoveries, the organizers and contributors to the catalogue posed basic questions, such as, What images did early Christians use to express their faith openly? Were Christians the first Jews to part with Mosaic law by creating “graven images”? Did Christians look to Jewish and pagan sources for inspiration, and when did Christians begin to depict the life of Jesus? The exhibition also addressed the underlying theological significance of Early Christian iconography and the question of Christian identity in art. The latter is the theme of this article.

**PETER AND PAUL IN ROME**

The apostles Peter and Paul played a prominent role in the quest for Christian identity. From the time of the Christian Roman Empire (i.e. from the fourth century onwards), their images could have been viewed by many of the faithful on the grand scale of monumental mosaics, particularly if they lived in Rome (pl. 44a). The images of Peter and Paul in the exhibition at the Kimbell Museum of Art were mostly on small objects, although some larger funerary monuments made their way to Fort Worth as well (fig. 1).

The objects featuring the two main pillars of the church come in a wide range of media and materials. These include gold-glass medallions (pl. 45 a, 3 Herbert L. Kessler, “The Meeting of Peter and Paul in Rome: An Emblematic Narrative of Spiritual Brotherhood,” *DOP* 41 (1987): 265–275.

4 For an exhibition on the theme in Rome at the time of the Giubileo, see Angela Donati, ed., *Pietro e Paolo: la storia, il culto, la memoria nei primi secoli* (Milan: Electa, 2000). For a conference around that time, see Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum (ed.), *Pietro e Paolo. Il loro rapporto con Roma nelle testimonianze antiche* (SEAug 74; Rome 2001).