

## Christ Hidden in the Plain Sight of Art

By Paul J. Montenero

Sometimes it is challenging to practice our Christian faith in the world today. Sunday worship now has to compete with work, shopping and sports leagues that punish those who miss games or practice. In the 1960's, public schools ceased to lead organized prayer.<sup>1</sup> Society is chasing the practice of faith away from the public eye. Before giving up, consider what the Christian forefathers had to endure to insure that faith would be handed on to today's Christians.

Before the Roman Emperor, Constantine, issued his *Edict of Milan*, in 313, Christians were persecuted heavily. From 250-311, about 70,000 Christians were put to death under the rule of such emperors as Decius, Valerian and Diocletian.<sup>2</sup> The story of Jesus Christ had to be passed on in secret language that only the Christians could understand. This was achieved with the aid of indistinct art that decorated the catacombs and other Christian hiding places. Symbols, like the cross, pointed obviously to a following of Christ and would draw the attention of the persecutors. Instead, the teachings of Christ were told with symbols like a fish, an anchor and the Chi-Rho, for only Christians understood these symbols.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1-The Good Shepherd (c. 270-280)

Sometimes in this art, Christ had to wear a disguise like some kind of modern-day comic book superhero. An example of this is the statue, *The Good Shepherd* (Figure 1), by an unknown artist. It is estimated to have been created between 270–280. Standing at just under 20 inches tall, it is believed to come from Asia Minor and currently sits in the Cleveland Museum of Art. The clean-shaven face and hair style portrayed on this representation of Jesus gives him a Roman appearance. The tunic, cut above the knees, is an unusual look for Jesus when compared to images from later periods which show Christ and his Apostles in full length tunics. All men, from slaves to nobles, could wear a tunic of this shorter style, but only Roman citizens could wear the full length toga.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this representation of Christ depicts him as one of stature equal to a slave or servant – devoid of any indication of nobility.

Some 40 years later, in 313, the Christians would be free to practice their religion, just as any of the other religions, thanks to the aforementioned *Edict of Milan*. In addition, this edict by Constantine restored all property to the Christians and gave them the full support of the emperor. It would be two-thirds of a century later, in 380, that Emperor Theodosius I would declare Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire.

In the face of death, the early Christians felt it important enough to spread the stories of Christ and the resurrection, and grow the faith. They persisted in finding ways to worship Our Lord. They were not afraid. I remember, as a baseball coach, following the lead of another Catholic coach and refusing to schedule my team's games before 11:00 a.m. on Sundays. He wanted his boys to have the opportunity to go to church. I also I invited anyone who wished to pray to join me in a pre-game prayer. Because the team had a mix of Jews, Christians (and perhaps other religions), my prayer spoke only to God. As they took the field, the boys seemed to have a better spirit hidden in them. Get involved and be not afraid. Be a walking bible – it may be the only bible many will ever be exposed to.

<sup>1</sup> FindLaw, <http://statelaws.findlaw.com/education-laws/details-on-state-prayer-in-public-school-laws.html>

<sup>2</sup> John Vidmar, OP, *The Catholic Church Through the Ages, A History* (New Jersey, Paulist Press, 2014), 30

<sup>3</sup> William A. Dyness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Michigan, Baker Academic, 2001), 26-27

<sup>4</sup> History on the Net, *The Romans – Clothing*, <http://www.historyonthenet.com/the-romans-clothing/>