

Resurrecting God (Part 3)

The Early Christian Roman Pointing to the Side Gestures

In the figurative tradition of early Christianity, the representations of John's Revelation were given considerable prominence. It began in Rome at the beginning of the fourth century when depictions of symbols such as alfa and omega first appeared. Apocalyptic images linked to the visible manifestation of God began towards the middle of the fourth century - one of the few Christian themes which owes little to Byzantine art. An example of this is the mosaic in the Basilica of Santa Pudenziana in Rome fulfilled by several apocalyptic symbols: the four winged creatures, the images of the New Jerusalem (and Bethlehem) buildings, and the image of God gesturing horizontally off to the side (fig. 92).



Fig. 92

The Basilica was built towards the end of the fourth century and it is recognized as the earliest surviving centre of religious Christian welfare in Rome. It is dedicated to Pudens who was a Roman Senator converted to the Christian faith by the Apostles Peter and Paul. The place is famous for its mosaic in the apse commonly regarded as dating to the pontificate of Pope Innocent I (401–417). He initiated the adding of the Revelation Book among the Books of the New Testament in 405, celebrating the event by commissioning the mosaic. It illustrates in a figurative way one of the main Revelation's themes: the vision which proclaims the last days before Christ's return where all of the created world is worshipping God on his throne

surrounded by the lion, ox, angel, and eagle. According the Apocalypse they constantly cry "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come".

Shortly after it was built, the Basilica was saved from the destruction by Alaric and his army—an event which also gave the Pope Innocent I the occasion of making the mosaic, as it is shown in the inscription on the book in the hands of God: "Dominus Servator Ecclesiae Pudentianae", or "The Lord who saved the Church of Pudens". He is sitting on a throne pointing horizontally off to the side at the centre of the composition. Shown as a human figure, he is dressed in gold imperial garb representing his divine origins. His throne is placed as if between Earth and Heaven, flanked by a group of followers guided by the two chief Christ's apostles, Peter and Paul, at each side seated in a semicircle. Some of them are dressed like roman senators, actively gesturing in the air. The two women behind them are wearing golden peploes and holding out golden crowns that show their divine status too. God is posed facing front on his throne, actively gesturing that recalls the power of an emperor. He is making two-finger gesture with his right hand extended horizontally to the side that is resembling the pointing to the side gestures in the early medieval God's apocalyptic iconography. It is the first surviving representation preserved in a church.

It is notable that the outline of the hill (Golgotha) and the figure of God that is infant of it are synchronized to the point where the end of the hill meets the tip of God's pointing to the side gesture. The Hill is as if following God's hand! The entire upper part of God's body together with the upper part of his throne is as if embedded in the Golgotha hill. Above, the Cross is rising surrounded by the New Jerusalem and Bethlehem buildings reminding that God raised Christ from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion as described by the Gospel authors (In Acts 2:24, Peter says that "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it", and Paul was even more precise to say that Christ was raised from the dead through the "glory of the Father" (Romans 6:4).) This lead to a new, spiritual body which has been explained as a glorified body, or spirit-empowered body, made of a finer material than the flesh. This is a significant truth in the story of the first coming that points to the pivotal role of God in re-creating Christ's body and the role that God is expected to play in the future when the city of "YHWH Shamma" (Ezek 48:35), or the New Jerusalem is to appear. This is related to the return of Christ which comprises the core of the motif represented in the Basilica of Santa Pudenzianais.

Attempting to investigate the deeper meaning of the mosaic, it is also worth considering several other key points of artistic exploration. They concern first of all the changes made in the mosaic during the restoration in the late sixteenth century. When in 1588 the church was remodeled, this involved making the apse shallower by cutting some parts of the mosaic and probably an apostle removed at each side. At a certain point, as shown in the 1595 sketch by Alfonso Ciacconio (1540 – 1599) (fig. 93) the lower part of the mosaic was removed. As a result one cannot see two of the Holy Trinity members, the Lamb, symbolic of Christ, and the Dove, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, in the mosaic today. Sent by God, the Dove seems descending above the Lamb. The renovation, however, hid the Dove and the Lamb leaving God alone and lacking the support of others in this mosaic, originally related to the Holy Trinity. Interestingly, the Ciacconio's sketch did not portray the New Jerusalem buildings which means that most likely they were not part of the original mosaic.



Furthermore, the sketch shows that Paul's original *middle fingers gesture* was omitted which might have happened in some of the subsequent nineteenth century restorations. At that time the majority of the right side figures of the apse was reset and their appearance changed. Seemingly, the *middle fingers gesture* made by one of them was not part of the original mosaic.

In the presence of the Lamb and the Dove, as well as the four living beasts of the Revelation Book, New Jerusalem-Bethlehem iconography and the horizontal pointing to the side gesture, the seated figure at the centre of the mosaic in the Basilica of Santa Pudenziana is can be assuredly identified as God the Father. Although his image varies tremendously in Christian art, in this case it is strongly signified by the direct parallels to the supreme Father God of the Ancient Greek, Zeus (fig. 94), or his Roman equivalent Jupiter (fig. 95) and his Egyptian equivalent Serapis (fig. 96). All of them were depicted with long flowing beard, abundant hair and broad face, signalling strong will.



Fig. 94 - 96

The figure of God in the S. Pudenziana mosaic is comparable to many early Christian representations: the mosaic in the sixth century church San Lorenzo fuori le Mura in Rome (fig. 97, cropped); the fourth century mosaic in the church Santa Costanza in Rome (fig. 98); the fourth century fresco in the Catacomb of Saints Marcellinus and Peter on the Via Labicana (fig. 99); the busts in the late fifth century mosaic on fig. 140; and the bust in the fourth century fresco on fig. 141. The sixth century mosaic in the church of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura in Rome represents God sitting on a globe which is different from the Earth on which Paul and Peter are standing. He is pointing diagonally off to the side flanked by them - both dressed as roman senators. Paul is pointing to the same side while holding a scroll. God is garbed in dark robe holding a staff of power in his left hand.



Fig. 97

Santa Costanza is a fourth-century church in Rome with some of the oldest surviving Christian mosaics. It shows God bearded and looking like the god Zeus. Again, he is pointing horizontally off to the side while staring off into the distance. Again, he is sitting upon the globe that is different from the Earth. Garbed in dark imperial toga, he is holding a book surrounded by trees, clouds and a youthful apostle dressed as a roman senator.

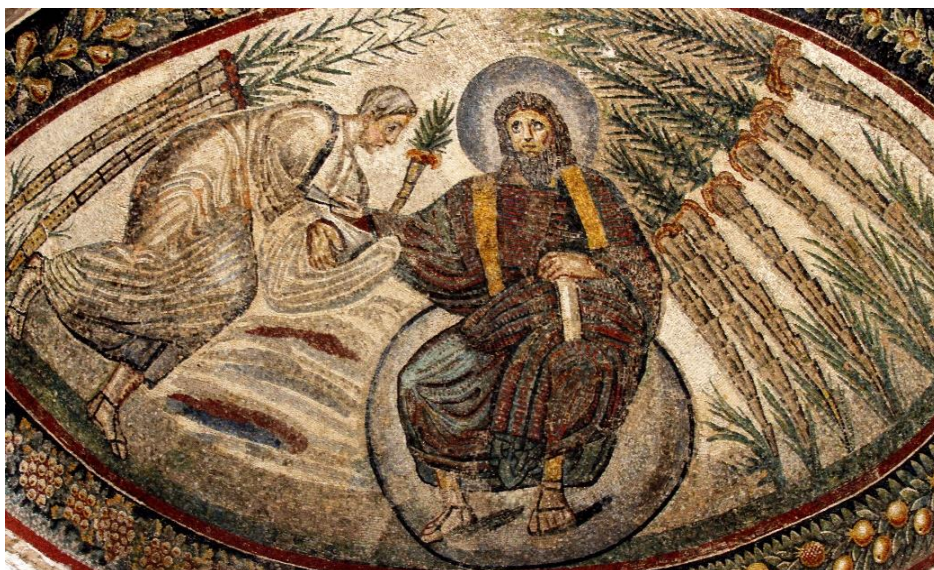


Fig. 98

One of the earliest mid-fourth century fresco in the Catacomb of Saints Marcellinus and Peter on the Via Labicana that was a part of the network of underground Christian cemeteries located in and around Rome on fig. 99 also depicts fully bearded God looking like the god Zeus. It is considered the first to represent God enthroned and similar to Pudenzianais's mosaic is painted on two horizontal zones: the upper occupied by God, and the lower, by the Lamb, or Christ. Peter and Paul stand at God's left and right wearing senator's togas while God is portrayed in a dark toga that is as if merging with the throne. He is both pointing and staring *off to the side!* The apocalyptic letters Alfa and Omega flank his halo signifying that he is the One "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the almighty"! In the lower register the martyr saints are seen praising the Christ who is standing on a mound.



Fig. 99

The mosaic on fig. 100 depicts God in an imperial toga and as Zeus in appearance. He is showing the two-fingers, pointing to the side gesture garbed in imperial gold. Left and right are the Greek letters Alpha and Omega of the John's Revelation which has similarity to the forth century Catacomb of Commodilla fresco shown on fig. 101. It is considered the oldest representation of the fully bearded God! Again, he is depicted in an imperial toga and as Zeus in appearance! His head is slightly turned to the side and his warm eyes are deeply staring out towards the stars. Several flowers are flanking his figure, signifying the sky, as well as the Greek apocalyptic letters Alpha and Omega.



Fig. 100 - 101

This same type of motif emerged in the late third- and early fourth-century Christian catacombs. For instance, many of the frescos in the fourth century Catacomb of Domitilla represent an enthroned a similar god-like figure dressed in white, flanked by apostles and pointing to the side (fig. 102-106). In these examples his appearance, however, is different: youthful and beardless.



Fig. 102

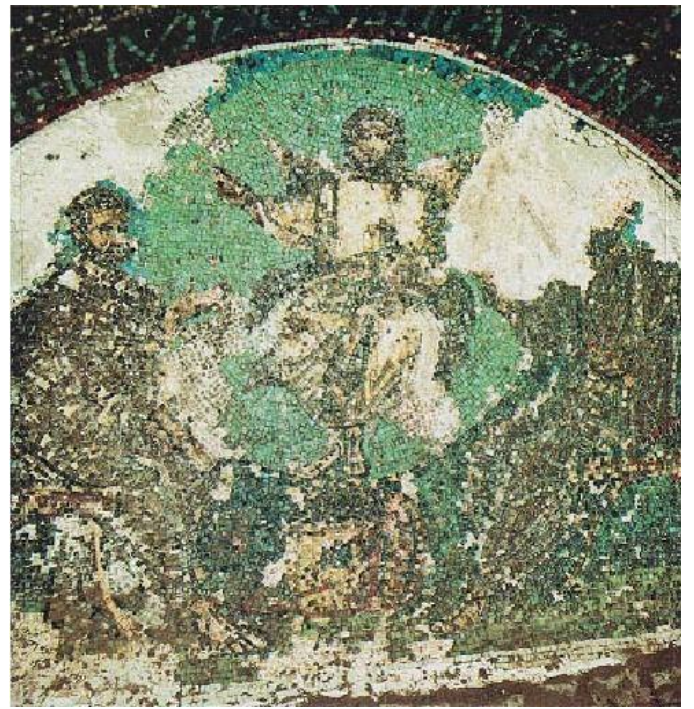


Fig. 103 – 104



Fig. 105



Fig. 106

The representation from the Catacomb of Commodilla on fig. 107 shows a similar god-like young and clean-shaven figure. Sitting on a globe that is *different from the Earth* he is flanked by Peter and Paul standing on the Earth. Dressed in a robe of imperial purple he is holding a book and as usual pointing horizontally off to the side.



Fig. 107

The late fourth Sant' Aquilino's mosaic on fig. 108 represents the same: a youthful god-like figure sitting *above* his apostles and pointing off to the sky. It is holding an open scroll with his left hand flanked by Peter in the left and Paul in the right who as in many of the examples shown above are dressed as roman senators.



Fig. 108

The fourth century Rome's Santa Costanza's mosaic on fig. 109 also represents a youthful, blond god-like figure flanked by Paul and Peter. It is standing as if in the clouds above the Earth with sheep at his feet. The scroll in Peter's hands reads, "DOMINUS PACEM DAT," or "The Lord Gives Peace."



Fig. 109

All these early Christian artworks which are found in Rome or have their origin in that city represent the pointing to the side motif. Since 1858 they are banded together under the title *traditio legis* invented by a group of scholars who have interpreted the motif as “Christ standing on a mountain holding an open scroll flanked by the apostles Peter and Paul”. In the following pages we will pay attention on this invention, however, before this, in order to decipher the meaning of the motif in question, that reemerged in the early Middle Ages in apocalyptic context, we will look for pre-Christian prototypes that may have served as inspiration. *Many details and the compositional scheme show that it is not a simple illustration of a Christian text but includes features that come from the ancient world. Early Christian artisans imitated common classical models.*