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## Metaphors and Visual Images of the Church in Early Christian Literature

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### 1. Introduction

In his book *Understandings of the Church*, published in 2016, the former president of the North American Patristic Society, professor Everett Ferguson, noted that the study of early Christian ecclesiology has often been more interested in the institutional side of the church and less on what was thought about the nature or essence of the church. Additionally, even in studies dealing with the doctrine of the church, too little attention has been given to images describing the church despite the fact that the early Christians themselves very often formulated their views precisely through such images.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he suggests that a fruitful way to see what the early Christians thought about themselves is to analyze the images of the church used by the fathers. Ferguson mentions some central works where this has been done: Hugo Rahner's *Symbole der Kirche* (1964), David Rankin's *Tertullian and the Church* (1995), and above all F. Ledegang's magnum opus *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and its Members in Origen* (2001), in which the author collects, categorizes and analyzes the ecclesial metaphors used by Origen. As an example of the use of patristic metaphors of the church in modern theology Ferguson mentions Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* (1987). To Ferguson's list could also be added Robert Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (2006), which deals with images of the church in the Syrian tradition. The situation today is very much as he describes.

In this article, my aim is therefore to study some metaphors used by the early Christians in both the formulating and the teaching of ecclesiology. I shall focus on the internal use of these images, and not on how the early Christians used them to define themselves against the Jews or the pagans. As additional material visual images are also used because it is fruitful to let literary and visual images dialogue with each other. In the second part of this article, I will study the development of the use of one image of the church, a ship. Not necessarily based on Scripture, it nonetheless became one of the most used images of the church.

The expression *image of the church* can mean two things. For Ferguson they are figures of speech or metaphors used to explain or define the nature or functions of the church, for example by comparing it to a hospital or a school. In the New Testament we find many such images, such as the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12.12-27; Rom. 12.4-8; Col. 1.18; Eph. 1.21-23) and the Bride of Christ (Rom. 7.2-4; Eph. 5.32). The term *image of the church*, can, however, also refer to visual images, such as paintings on the walls of the catacombs or reliefs on the

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<sup>1</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Understandings of the Church*, Minneapolis 2016, 2.

sarcophagi. In this article, I have used Robin Jensen's recent studies on early Christian art as far as they relate to ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. How to interpret early Christian metaphors and visual images?

The metaphors and visual images in early Christian literature and art and their interpretations are deeply rooted on the one hand in Jewish and Christian traditions, and on the other hand in pre-Christian antiquity. In order to be understood by the believers, these images had to be somehow familiar to them. Therefore, in order to understand how the early Christians interpreted these images, it is important to know their world as well as possible.

Early Christian paintings, mosaics and sculptures can be studied and interpreted from several points of view. Art historians are trained to start with the image and study it without first having read from a text what it means. Scholars trained in textual studies, on the other hand, carry the risk of seeing visual art only as an illustration of a text that merely repeats what has already been said in the text, but which contains no additional content in itself. Because in fact both texts and images can have a message of their own, the best alternative – whenever possible – is to let both these approaches meet and complement each other.<sup>3</sup>

A theology of visual art asks how abstract and invisible contents of faith, such as the church, can be expressed through visual images. Symbols of different kinds need to be used to present and teach eternal, invisible, and complex entities. Early Christians were able to build their theory in interpretation of visual art on earlier Greek and Roman thought, but in time they also developed their own. The task of depicting or symbolizing what the church is, is a special case in the field of theology, because the concept *ecclesia* means not only a visible community of Christians – and from the third century onwards even a church building –, but also an invisible reality transcending the limits of time and place.

An important question in the interpretation is how much can be read into an image. When there is no textual interpretation of a certain visual image, it is not necessarily possible to say how early Christians understood it. One must avoid over-interpretation: later interpretations should not be read into an old image, and all details in an image do not necessarily carry a meaning, they may simply be ornamental. In recent times, however, several scholars have warned of the risks of under-interpretation, by which it is meant that the criteria of interpretation are too strict.<sup>4</sup> In order to find the original meaning we must seek for the first appearance of an image, clarify its roots, and then trace the possible development of interpretation.

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, London and New York 2000; Robin Jensen, *The Cross. History, Art, and Controversy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 2-4.

<sup>4</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 27-29.137.

The question of the appearance of the cross of Christ in visual art is a good example of how recent scholarship has become critical towards earlier over-cautious interpretations. It has been, namely, put into question whether the early Christians produced images of the cross at all. Apologists of the third century, however, did defend Christians against pagans who claimed that they worshipped crosses, and this strongly suggests that such images did exist.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the first surviving images of the cross in public Christian art are from later times; namely the image of the cross found on the fifth century wooden doors of Santa Sabina in Rome.<sup>6</sup> The absence of crucifixes or crosses prior to this date has been explained in several ways: the shamefulness of the Crucifixion, the hesitance of presenting God as an image, or the idea that it was problematic to present the Crucifixion without somehow simultaneously presenting the Resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, however, several scholars have pointed out that the case is not that simple. In his *The Cross Before Constantine. The Early Life of a Christian Symbol* (2015) Bruce Longenecker has shown that already before Constantine, crosses in fact were presented as hidden.<sup>8</sup> Robin Jensen reaches the same conclusion in her new study *The Cross. History, Art, and Controversy* (2017) and already in *Understanding Early Christian Art* (2000).<sup>9</sup> The term “hidden cross” or “cryptocross” refers to images where a cross is hidden, for example in the image of an anchor, so that the viewer has to know the Christian interpretation in order to recognize its presence.<sup>10</sup> A strong argument in favour of this kind of use of images is that there are texts from the same time period that witness the same thing. Justin, in his First Apology, gives several examples of everyday phenomena that are in form of a cross in his midst and which refer to the cross of Christ: a mast of a ship, tools, a human body with outstretched arms, and a human face with a nose through which people breathe (Just. 1 Apol. 55.3-6). Minucius Felix (Oct. 29.6-8) and Tertullian (Adv. Marc. 4.25) pick up this thought and develop it further adding military trophies to the list. Because of these kinds of texts Jensen and Longenecker see that it is perfectly possible that those early Christians artists who depicted, for example, anchors on the walls of the catacombs, had the cross of Christ in mind.<sup>11</sup>

It is equally probable that the early Christian prayer position, *orans*, where hands were lifted high on both sides, hints at the cross of Christ. Tertullian, namely, combines the crucifixion and this prayer position when teaching prayer to Carthaginian catechumens: “We however not only lift them (our hands) up, but also spread them out, and, modulating them by the Lord's passion, in our prayers also express our faith in Christ” (Or. 14). A few lines down he then

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<sup>5</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 130-132; Jensen, *The Cross*, 74-75. Tert. Apol. 16 1 and 12; Minucius Felix Oct. 29.6; Origenes *Contra Celsum* 2.47. On the so-called Alexamenos-graffito on Palatine about from the year 200 AD see Heikki Solin e Marja Itkonen-Kaila, *Graffiti del Palatino I. Paedagogium*, Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae III, No 246, 1966.

<sup>6</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 130-131; *The Cross*, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 133-137.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine. The Early Life of a Christian Symbol*. Minneapolis 2015.73-119.

<sup>9</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 130f.

<sup>10</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine*, 85.

refers to the three friends of Daniel who are pictured in the *orant* -position in catacomb art (*Or.* 15). In funeral inscriptions the soul of the deceased is also often presented in this cross-formed position. For the early Christian ecclesiology the cross of Christ is central. Already in the New Testament, the connection between Christ and the Christians is depicted with the image of the vine and the branches. A little later, the idea of the Church being formed from the water and blood streaming from the side of the Crucified, spread widely.<sup>12</sup>

These examples show that it is not always easy to say with certainty when an image, visual or textual, first appears in Christian use. In second part of this article, I shall deal with another image the appearance of which is difficult to date for another reason: similar images were used in pre-Christian antiquity, too, and at some point they began to be applied to Christian concepts.

### 3. Images of the Church from the Old and the New Testaments

Most of the images of the Church used by the early Christians naturally originate from the Old and the New Testaments. Ledegang classifies the ones used by Origen into six categories, which in their part contain subcategories. The main categories are: body of Christ, bride of Christ, family of God, the temple or a Building, people of God, and the cosmos, that is, “the earth and what is on it”.<sup>13</sup> Common to these biblical images is that they are all dynamic: a Christian belonging to the church is a living stone in a building in the making, or a part of a living body with special tasks, or a member of a family. A Christian is not only inside something, but also part of something. The images used by Origen represent well the images used by the theologians of the first centuries. They express the closeness between the church and its members and Christ or the Triune God. Belonging to the church is the way to participate in divine life and salvation. They also express a sense of community: a Christian is not alone, but is always a part of a community, the church. They also express that the church is one.

Using symbols is very common in antique art, but using Old Testament people and events as types for New Testament individuals and events and even later Christian concepts is a specifically Christian method.<sup>14</sup> In their typological interpretation, all images which in the Old Testament symbolized the people of God, such as a bride or spouse of God (Isa. 66.7-14; Isa. 51.1), could easily be transferred to symbolize the church. Biblical mothers were used in the same way.<sup>15</sup> This can be seen already in the New Testament (Eph. 5). Later, both in early Christian texts, such as the second vision in the Shepherd of Hermas, and in visual arts, such

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<sup>12</sup> Anni Maria Laato, Adam’s Ecstasy and Prophecy in Tertullian, in: Antti Laato and Lotta Valve (Eds.) Adam and Eve Story in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives. Studies in the Reception History of the Bible 8. Winona Lake, Indiana, 71-83, 2017.80-81.

<sup>13</sup> F. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and its Members in Origen*. Leuven, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Jensen, Compiling Narratives: The Visual Strategies of Early Christian Visual Art, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23:1 (2015) 1-26, 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Anni Maria Laato, *Biblical mothers as images of the Church*, in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, London 2019.

as the apsis mosaics of Santa Pudenziana and Santa Sabina in Rome, distinguished ladies were used to symbolize the church.

In addition to re-using biblical images, the early Christians also developed them further and created completely new images. New motifs were gathered from their own environment and from pre-Christian art. The community of Christians was symbolized with a fish or many fish, or with a shepherd and his sheep both in visual images in the catacombs and funerary inscriptions, as well as in texts from the same time.<sup>16</sup> Images related to faith and membership of the church included, for example, anchors, ships and doves.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. A ship or a boat becomes an image of the church

##### 4.1 A new image?

Now we shall turn to an image which became a common symbol for a church: a ship or an ark. Unlike the above mentioned biblical images, a ship or a boat was not used in Scripture as an image of the church, even if later interpretations build, to a degree, on biblical texts.

According to Kurt Goldammer, the biblical texts were not the main root for this image.<sup>18</sup>

Already before Christianity, ships and boats were common symbols for a group of people or a life-path of an individual. Goldammer presents extensive evidence for the political use of this image: a ship was understood as a symbol of the state. On the other hand, before the Christian era, a journey by boat was also a common metaphor for a soul's journey through this life into the afterlife; it was therefore easy for the early Christians to adapt this image for their own purposes.<sup>19</sup> The pre-Christian roots of this image, however, can sometimes make it difficult to say whether a certain image is Christian or not, and how much can be read into it.

The metaphor of a ship or a boat, both in texts and in visual art, proved to be a successful image. For the residents in the coastal areas around the Mediterranean, seafaring was familiar and the images were easy to develop further: a ship is on its way from some place to a home harbor, on the way all kinds of things can happen, the weather can be pleasant or stormy, and even shipwrecks can occur. On a ship there are the crew, different items are needed etc. All these real things could be and were interpreted spiritually.

Georg Stuhlfauth, in an article published in 1942, carefully lists all (in his time) known images of a ship in early Christian art.<sup>20</sup> He concluded that in funerary inscriptions a ship or a boat is not as common as an anchor or an *orans*, but nonetheless still occurred rather often. He saw this as a natural continuation of a pre-Christian symbolism; it was not a problem for the

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<sup>16</sup> Robin Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity. Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions*. Grand Rapids, Michigan 2012, 69-82.

<sup>17</sup> Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Goldammer, *Das Schiff der Kirche*, in: *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 6 no 3 (1950) 232-237.

<sup>19</sup> Georg Stuhlfauth, *Das Schiff als Symbol der altchristlichen Kunst*, in: *Rivista di archeologia Cristiana* 19 (1942), 111-141, 131.

<sup>20</sup> Stuhlfauth, *Das Schiff*, 111-141.

Christians to interpret this symbol in their own way.<sup>21</sup> For both pagans and Christians the direction of the ship was of importance. Even the lighthouse, also common in this context, symbolized the right route and goal.<sup>22</sup>

## 4.2 Noah's Ark

The Biblical roots for the Christian interpretations of the image of a ship are the story of Noah's Ark, the Old Testament passages about being saved from chaos-waters and storms, and the Gospel narratives about Peter's boat. In his article *Das Schiff als Symbol der Kirche*, Erik Peterson stresses that all three roots need to be studied separately.<sup>23</sup> Things that in later texts are combined and used together are not necessarily joined in earlier texts.

In the Old Testament, a ship or a boat is not used as an image of the people of God. There are of course many images symbolizing salvation from the waters, above all the story of Noah's Ark (Gen. 6; Sap. 14.6-7) and young Moses in a basket (Exod. 2). In the New Testament there are, however, no direct links between a ship and the church. 1 Peter 3.20 (cf. 2 Pet. 2.5), where it is told that eight persons are saved through the water, comes closest to that connection, but the text refers to baptism, not directly to the church. As an image for baptism the motif of the waters and the Ark of Noah symbolize the purification of the baptized and their salvation. Similarly, during the first century the narratives concerning Peter and the boat, specifically the story of Jesus stilling the storm (Mark 4.35-41; Matt. 8.23-27; Luke 8.22-25) were not seen as referring to the church; this came later.

The first Christian theologian to write more extensively about the Noah's Ark was Justin Martyr. He did not, however, call it an image of the *church*, but rather of *baptism*. In order to teach about the connection between the cross and baptism, he lists Old Testament passages about water and wood/tree. For him, the righteous Noah prefigures Christ. He even emphasizes that the material of the Ark, the wood, symbolized the cross, when he writes in Dial. 138:

Justin: You know, then, sirs, that God has said in Isaiah to Jerusalem: 'I saved you in the deluge of Noah.' By this which God said was meant that the mystery of saved men appeared in the deluge. For righteous Noah, along with the other mortals at the deluge, i.e., with his own wife, his three sons and their wives, being eight in number, were a symbol of the eighth day, wherein Christ appeared when He rose from the dead, for ever the first in power. For Christ, being the first-born of every creature, became again the chief of another race regenerated by Himself through water, and faith, and wood, containing the mystery of the cross; even as Noah was saved by wood when he rode over the waters with his household. Accordingly, when the prophet says, 'I saved you in

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<sup>21</sup> Stuhlfauth, *Das Schiff*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Stuhlfauth, *Das Schiff*, 132.

<sup>23</sup> Erik Peterson, *Das Schiff als Symbol der Kirche*, in: *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 6 (1950), 77-79.

the times of Noah,' as I have already remarked, he addresses the people who are equally faithful to God, and possess the same signs.<sup>24</sup>

Justin explains that like Noah, even Christ is the origin of a new race. In this way, the Noah story was connected with baptism and with the church. Justin is the first of many theologians who developed the idea that there were eight individuals saved in the Ark.<sup>25</sup>

In visual art, Noah in his Ark appears on the scene early. It is a common motif in the Roman catacombs; the oldest image is dated to the beginning of the third century in the Catacomb of Domitilla.<sup>26</sup> The same motif is even found in Roman sarcophagi, for example in the sarcophagus of Jonah in the Vatican Museums which is dated to the fourth century. Typical for these images is that the Ark is not depicted in a ship-form, none of the animals nor any other passengers than Noah are present. Instead, Noah is pictured as standing on a box-like structure, sometimes a box with a lid. As reason for this, it has been suggested that the artists wanted to make a connection to the building instructions in Gen. 6.3-22, according to which the Ark is like a huge box, however, not a cube. Another explanation that has been proposed is that it derives from the way Deukalion and Pyrrha, who according to Greek mythology fell into water because of a diluvium caused by Zeus, are often pictured.<sup>27</sup> Thirdly, the early Christians may have been inspired by Jewish art, where Noah is pictured in a similar box: coins with images of Noah and his wife with an inscription "Noah" dated to the beginning of the third century have been found from Apamea in Asia Minor.<sup>28</sup> These may, of course, have been influenced by Greek art. A fourth explanation, suggested by Jensen, is the connection to the Ark of Covenant because the theme of covenant combines the Noah-stories and baptism.<sup>29</sup>

It is not at all certain that the earliest images of Noah's Ark should be taken as symbolizing the church. In texts from the same time, the Noah-story was used as illustrating baptism, even the dove is part of baptismal imagery symbolizing peace and the Holy Spirit (cf. Tert. Bapt. 8.4. Ambr. Myst. 3.10-11).<sup>30</sup> Noah-symbols reminded those who saw them of salvation from destruction and purification through water. Baptism and its contents are, of course, connected to ecclesiology, but nonetheless symbolizing baptism and symbolizing the church are two very different things. Additionally, the fact that in the texts Noah is seen as a type of Christ would be enough to explain the occurrence of this image in the catacomb art and the sarcophagi. That would explain why he is pictured alone, without his family and the animals.

Justin Martyr used another nautical image which has also influenced later ecclesiological imagery. In 1. Apol. 55.3, he compares the cross of Christ to the mast and sail of a ship. He

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<sup>24</sup> English translation, Marcus Dods and George Reith, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, New York, 1885). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

<sup>25</sup> Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 206. Cf. Augustine's sermo 260C. 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 18-20.

<sup>27</sup> Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Heinz Schreckenberg & Kurt Schubert, *Jewish Historiography and Iconography in Early and Medieval Christianity*, Minneapolis 1992, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 16.



did not, however, say that this ship symbolizes the church; rather he wanted to claim that the figure of the cross was hidden in many things visible to everybody, and that in these lowly things a message of victory and power was hidden.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Tertullian and Minucius Felix, who adopted this image from Justin, did not connect it with the church either.

### 4.3 Peter's Boat

In the *Museo Pio Cristiano* in the Vatican Museums there is an early fourth century fragment of a sarcophagus lid showing Christ and the evangelists in a boat. Their names (John, Luke and Mark are still visible) are engraved beneath the picture.<sup>32</sup> It is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, image of a ship which is clearly an allegorical presentation of the church. Christ is pictured as steering the boat with one hand and showing the direction with the other. The evangelists are rowing the boat. This image represents a new interpretation of an old symbol: Peter's boat is now a symbol of the church. About the same time as this image appeared to the Christian imaginary, the symbol of a ship disappeared from funerary inscriptions.<sup>33</sup>

The earliest text in which Peter's boat symbolizes the church is in Tertullian's *De baptismo* 12.12. Because Tertullian was writing about another question (pertaining to whether the apostles were baptized or not) and he only happens to mention the boat and its interpretation, the reader is given the impression that Tertullian used an old metaphor and had not developed it himself. Tertullian compares the persecutions and temptations which the church (*ecclesia*) meets in this world to the stormy seas that disturbed the little ship (*navicula*). The Lord is sleeping, but is woken by the prayers of the saints, and in the last extremities (*in ultimis*) he restores the peace.

About the year 200, Hippolytos (*De Antichristo* 59) gives a more developed version of the ship as the church. Because the word "trophy", used by Justin, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix in this context, is found even here, it is probable that the author knew them or shared the same tradition. I quote a longer passage:

But we who hope for the Son of God are persecuted and trodden down by those unbelievers. For the wings of the vessels are the churches; and the sea is the world, in which the Church is set, like a ship tossed in the deep, but not destroyed; for she has with her the skilled Pilot, Christ. And she bears in her midst also the trophy (which is erected) over death; for she carries with her the cross of the Lord. For her prow is the east, and her stern is the west, and her hold is the south, and her tillers are the two Testaments; and the ropes that stretch around her are the love of Christ, which binds the Church; and the net which she bears with her is the layer of the regeneration which renews the believing,

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-Marc Prieur, *Das Kreuz in der christlichen Literatur der Antike*. Deutsche Übersetzung von Ellen Pagnamenta. Frankfurt am Main 2006, XXIII.

<sup>32</sup> Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 138-139.

<sup>33</sup> Stuhlfauth, *Das Schiff*, 133.

whence too are these glories. As the wind the Spirit from heaven is present, by whom those who believe are sealed: she has also anchors of iron accompanying her, viz., the holy commandments of Christ Himself, which are strong as iron. She has also mariners on the right and on the left, assessors like the holy angels, by whom the Church is always governed and defended. The ladder in her leading up to the sailyard is an emblem of the passion of Christ, which brings the faithful to the ascent of heaven. And the top-sails aloft upon the yard are the company of prophets, martyrs, and apostles, who have entered into their rest in the kingdom of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

The church is again compared to a ship, steered by Christ. Details of the ship, the crew, and the passengers are given allegorical interpretations. At this point similar interpretations started appearing in Christian literature, for example in Apostolic Constitutions 2.57. Goldammer suggests that these kinds of presentations began as conscious counter-narratives to political ship-metaphors where the ship represented the state.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4.4 The connection between the Ark, the boat and the church becomes established

Two authors writing in the third century, Origen and Cyprian, started using the image of the Ark as a symbol for the church on a larger scale. Ledegang mentions that even if Origen did not give a full definition of what the church was, he studied that particular theme specifically through images. This was – as noted above – characteristic for all writers in the first centuries AD.

Among Origen's sermons on Genesis, there is a sermon on Noah's Ark. The author describes the Ark in detail and gives an allegorical interpretation to it. Based on Luke 17:26-27, he connects the Flood-story to the end of the world. Like Justin, he also says that the one who saves people from destruction is Jesus, the second Noah.<sup>36</sup> He compares the Ark with the church, and says that the people that are saved in the church are like those people and animals saved in the Ark (Gen.h. 2.3.28-30). According to him, the just Noah prefigures Christ, who is the architect and builder of the Church (Gen.h.2.3.12-21; 2.4.51-57). The details, numbers and structure of the Ark are given allegorical interpretations. The pyramid-form of the Ark, for instance, symbolizes the hierarchy of the church – the ordinary sinners form the majority of the members of the church. Important is that Origen claims that in the same Ark, i.e. the church, there are Jewish Christians and Christians from a pagan background.

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<sup>34</sup> English translation J.H. MacMahon. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, New York., 1886.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

<sup>35</sup> Goldammer, *Das Schiff der Kirche*, 232-237.

<sup>36</sup> On Noah as the origin of a new race, see even Origenes Ezech.h.4.8.49 and Proba, *Cento Vergilianus*, 323-329.

A very different approach is found in Cyprian of Carthage. He uses the image of the Ark to emphasize that the church is one, and one can be saved only inside this church. He says that Peter has demonstrated that the church is one, and baptism can be given only in the church. Only *in arca*, that is, only inside the Ark, is salvation – and thus the Novatians are not inside the Ark, and their baptism is not valid (Eccl. unit. 6; ep. 69.2). Both Simonis and Ratzinger have noted that Cyprian in general uses images that describe the church spatially, as something which one is inside of: a house or Rahab's house (Mort. 6, Ep. 69.4), or a harbour (Donat. 14). Cyprian separates the laity and the clergy when stating that it is the bishop who steers the church. Once, when congratulating a certain Lucius who had been appointed a bishop, he said: "And so has a helmsman been restored for piloting the ship (*gubernandae navi gubernator*) and the ruler for governing the people" (Ep. 61).

In the fourth and fifth centuries the image of a ship was already familiar, and was used in several ways. Jerome, for instance, explains the story allegorically (Dial. Adv. Luciferianos 22), and Augustine interprets it both as describing the path of one person or the church (homily 63).

When used to describe the church, the image of a ship or a boat, both in text and in visual art, expressed several things. From the earliest texts on, it was connected to salvation from destruction, already now, but above all in the last days, as a ship is on its way home. The emphasis was, very commonly, also on the unity of the church. This one church cannot be destroyed in stormy waters; a single Christian can, however, fall from the ship, and has to be taken on board again.

## 5. Conclusions

For the Christians in the first centuries it was important to understand what it meant to be a Christian and what the church was. Metaphors and images were often used to deal with these questions. Many of these images were known from the Old and the New Testaments, but they were also developed further in new contexts and a set of new images developed alongside the existing ones. The advantages of using metaphors and visual images are clear: they are easy to remember, and by using them it is possible express things that are more difficult to formulate with dogmatic definitions. Metaphors and images are open for different interpretations, and they are easy to develop. For example, the image of a ship has served numerous purposes in the theology and praxis of the early church.

One single image expresses perhaps only one side of the church, however, and therefore, several images are needed. The richness and diversity of the early Christian metaphors and images (consider the church as a hospital, a military camp, a vine, a mother etc.) witnesses how central a theme ecclesiology was in the early centuries, but also how many different aspects of ecclesiology the early Christians wanted to express. The variety of the images also reveals something of the various contexts of those who used them. For example Cyprian, writing against the Novatians, chose images that expressed unity and the need of the faithful

to stay inside the Catholic Church and not to leave it. Instead of saying that the Christians together *formed* a building, he stated that they were *inside* a building. The images he uses, also emphasize a hierarchical understanding of the relation between clergy and laity. This is a novelty compared to the images of the church found in the New Testament and earlier texts, in which membership of the church and active participation are more central.

The example of a ship or a boat as a figure of speech and a visual image of the church shows how the early Christians used not only biblical images but also images known from Greek and Roman philosophy, literature, and art, as well as from their everyday life. They did not hesitate to give a new, Christian, interpretation to old images, which sometimes makes it difficult for later interpreters to decide whether a certain image is Christian or not – the ship as a symbol for a soul's journey is a good example of this. The choice, use, and interpretation of metaphors and visual images for the church had, of course, their limits, and were regulated by *regula fidei*, the rule of faith.