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Christian Reflection.

**With a cruciform gesture of prayer, Saint Apollinaris
inspires calm assurance and an attitude of prayer in
those who approach the altar of the Lord in the
congregation he protects.**

The Orant

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

The mosaic in the eastern apse of San Apollinare in Classe, Italy, depicts the protector of the congregation, Apollinaris, in prayer. This Byzantine church combines Early Christian architecture with the eastern style of mosaic painting brought there by Emperor Justinian, who reigned 527-565.[†] The church was modeled after San Vitale in Ravenna, which is located only four miles north of Classe, the Adriatic seaport for Ravenna.

According to church history, Peter appointed Apollinaris to be the first bishop of Ravenna, and he died a martyr, probably in Classe, during a persecution of Christians under the rule of Emperor Vespasian (69-79). Bishop Maximilian consecrated the church in his memory in 549.

The depiction of Apollinaris in the center of the lower portion of the mosaic incorporates two traditional representations of early Christian art. The saint's arms are uplifted in the traditional cruciform gesture of the orant (from the Latin for "person who prays"). His position among twelve sheep in green fields with trees, flowers, and birds recalls the symbol of Christ as Good Shepherd that is common in catacomb paintings.

The twelve sheep near Apollinaris represent the congregation that he protects and should not be confused with the twelve disciples, who are also represented as sheep in an upper section of the mosaic. The disciple-sheep, which are painted on diagonals radiating from the central image of a blessing Christ, guide the viewer's eye back to the figure of Apollinaris. The two sections of the apse are united by symbols for the Savior Christ (a jeweled gold cross in a large blue medallion) and God the Father (we see only the hand of God).

Modern day viewers may be forgiven for misidentifying Saint Apollinaris as Christ the Good Shepherd until on closer review they recognize the robes of a bishop. As this protector of the congregation prays for his flock, he inspires calm assurance and an attitude of prayer in those who approach the altar of the Lord.

NOTE

[†] For more information on the architecture of San Apollinare in Classe, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Immigrant Churches," *Immigration, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008), 55-62.