



The Coat of Arm of the Diocese of Syracuse

The Diocese of Syracuse was erected by Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) on November 26, 1886. Patrick Ludden the vicar general of the Albany Diocese was chosen by Pope Leo XIII to be the first bishop. It fell to the new bishop, among a myriad of other responsibilities, to choose a coat of arms for the diocese that would both define the diocese and represent it.

A coat of arms is an ancient device which is a symbolic representation of the identity of a family or region. The origin of heraldry is said to be deeply involved in the military campaigns of the 12th century. In fact it was Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) who was the first pope to use a coat of arms. When one considers the confusion and disarray found during hand to hand battles almost a thousand years ago, some way of identifying friend versus foe was needed. Arms were displayed on a knight's shield (thus another name for this heraldic device is a shield) and in this way he could be identified even though he be covered head to toe in armor. Over the long history of heraldry numerous charges (symbols) have been developed and because of this a coat of arms is able to tell a complicated story in a relatively small device.

Bishop Ludden chose as the coat of arms of the Diocese of Syracuse the coat of arms of the city-state of Syracuse, Sicily when it was part of the Greek Empire. Thus Bishop Ludden had a comparatively easy task of defining, in symbol, the new diocese. While there are only three charges (symbols) they are quite sublime in their meaning in both a religious and symbolic form.

The three charges (symbols) in the shield are: the cross of gold (or), the upturned crescent in silver (argent) and the dolphin, the mammal not the fish, in silver (argent). The cross is, of course, the symbol par excellence of Christianity and is the symbol of our salvation. It is gold (or) because it is so important and its very presence speaks for itself.

The dolphin in silver (argent) represents Christ. The origin of this symbol comes from belief of ancient mariners who would see dolphins swimming alongside their boats.

They considered these friendly creatures a sign from God that He was watching over them in their journey and thus bringing comfort to them. In our coat of arms the dolphin is positioned downward (urinant) which symbolizes Christ bringing salvation down from the cross. A symbol (charge) pointing downward is so rare as to be quite exceptional. The upturned crescent in silver (argent) represents the Blessed Virgin Mary as found in Book of Revelation (12-1) "*A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.*" This descriptive verse is represented in the Mayer of Munich, Germany stained glass central window depiction of the Immaculate Conception in our Cathedral apse. If you look at her feet you will see the upturned crescent moon under them. The color blue (azure) represents, in heraldry, truth and loyalty.

Surmounting a diocesan shield is sometimes found the mitre (the mitre's use is dependent on how the arms are displayed). The mitre, normally worn by prelates is a symbol of rank. Up to 1970 the Church allowed bishops to place the mitre (and the crosier) in their personal coat of arms. In 1970 the use of the mitre and crosier in a bishop's coat of arms was forbidden. If you look at the coat of arms of the first nine bishops of Syracuse you will see that the newest additions, those of Bishops O'Keefe and Moynihan only contain the processional cross while the older ones contain the processional cross, the mitre and the crosier. The arms of the ordinary (jurisdictional bishop) are placed after retirement in the Cathedral. Interestingly, the arms of Bishop Frank Harrison (retired 1987, d.2004) and Bishop David Cunningham (retired 1975, d.1979) erroneously have the crosier and mitre in them, most probably because they were made by an artist copying one of the existing arms but lacking knowledge of the change in Church requirements for bishop's arms.

Written By:
Edward Long
Diocesan Historian
2011