

**BANNERS WITHOUT CORNERS**  
**A PROGRESSIVE SEMINAR, MUCH LIKE A PROGRESSIVE DINNER**  
**WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23, 2010, 2:00-5:00**  
**YOU ARE WELCOME TO ATTEND ALL OR PART**

Mandalas are a very appropriate art form for our study at this time, as they are an art form that spans history from humankind's earliest written communications to the present and is found in many cultures and spiritual groups encompassing the globe. It is, so to speak, a unifying image among diversity. Mandala is a word from the ancient Sanskrit language which, simply put, means a circle with a center. But, a mandala is more than just a shape. It is a symbol of wholeness; we feel a sense of protection within a circle, figuratively speaking, which increases the closer to the center we are. Closely associated with that is a spiral, also a mandala form which moves up and out rather than having a shape that circles back to its beginning, also having essentially no beginning and no end. A 3-dimensional spiral is called a helix, and a double helix is the structure of human DNA.

The early human experience lent itself to an abundance of time spent contemplating nature. Their very lives depended on time spent and attention directed to the cycles of the seasons with the temperature changes and harsh conditions visited on them on a regular and predictable schedule. They saw and felt the signs of imminent change in the trees, the air and the reactions of the animals in their world. They also began to notice the structure of things in nature. They saw the growth rings in trees and other circular and spiral shapes that appeared in nature everywhere around them. So, it was natural for them, as they began to put together a system of written communication, making crude drawings on rocks, that they used these shapes that had come to have meaning to them. Although they didn't know it at the time, these same shapes were in abundance within their physical bodies, right down to the shape of the atoms with their nuclei at the center of each and, at the other end of the spectrum, in the skies that they studied continuously. Many of the early societies worshiped the sun, because they had discovered the influence it had over their lives. The sun is a mandala, just as are the other heavenly bodies in our solar system, a solar system that circulates within a spiral nebula in our universe, within which are innumerable bodies rotating and revolving in circular patterns.

In Tibetan Buddhism, monks with years of spiritual and artistic study create sand mandalas that are sacred images to be contemplated in the search for understanding of Buddha's teachings. The mandala represents the universe, and the observer enters the mandala mentally and moves toward its center. There are two different types of Buddhist mandalas, representing

different aspects of the universe. The one called the Vajra-dhatu in Sanskrit means "diamond world" In this type, the movement within this mandala is **from the many into one.**

The Native Americans in this country create similar mandalas linked to their spiritual heritage, with much animal imagery, and both of these groups employ geometric designs in their composition, often quite intricate.

Throughout the ages, religious systems have found that the creation of or meditation using the mandala can soothe many psychological ailments that plague us or strip contentment from our lives. Life in this century fosters feelings of insecurity and impermanence in all of us. Ever before us on TV and movie screens are catastrophic disasters--some real and some envisioned--that show us in how many ways human existence can be destroyed, either by man itself, as a result of scientific research and development or by disease or even alien life. Psychotherapists who have used the mandala to treat patients have seen great improvement in their ability to cope with life events that had crippled them emotionally. This is an example of healing mandalas.

There are several other types of mandalas, but the main categories are Teaching and Healing. Perhaps the simplest way to explain the differences between the two categories is to say that with a teaching mandala, the meaning is determined before the construction of the mandala, and with a healing mandala, the mandala is constructed first and then the meaning is sought and, hopefully, determined after construction is complete. The purpose of a healing mandala is to bring comfort and understanding of the source of one's pain, most often emotional. As the psychotherapists who employ this type have discovered, the patient is generally unaware of the cause of their pain when they are in the process of creating the mandala, but afterward they often see the cause when they meditate on what they have created. I consider my mandalas to be primarily teaching ones, because I start with a symbol or picture in my mind that depicts a theme that I am trying to develop. This is preceded by a reading of the scripture and a prayer that the best visual image will be made known to me. I always strive to be theologically sound in developing my liturgical art. I like to believe that my teaching mandalas sometime bring healing to some who view them, so there can be overlap between the categories. The relaxation that comes from a calm, quiet contemplation of this art form comes from just letting your eyes wander around it, within the circle, often with no conscious thought about what you're seeing. The cause must be understood before healing can occur.

The symbolism I have chosen to include for the mandalas for this week's event have their origins in many cultures throughout

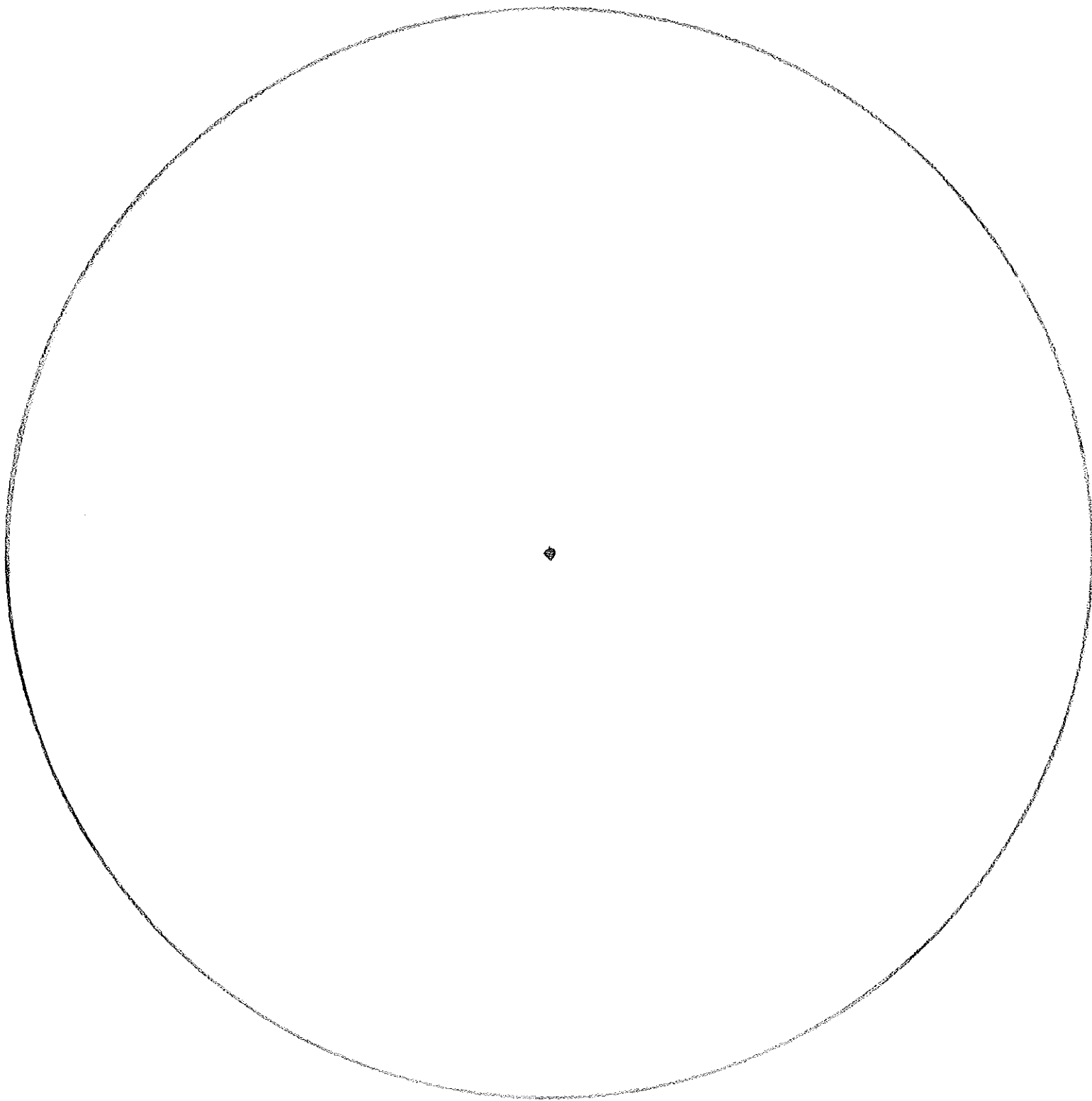
history, and have positive meaning for most of the world's people. They are just a sampling of the symbols found on mandalas throughout the world and are those that have found their way into Christian cultures from other world cultures past and present. They are simple yet reach us at a profound depth.

This has been just a brief overview of a very extensive volume of information on the subject, but I hope it will inspire you to investigate mandalas in greater depth. For our purposes here, I would like you to have the experience of creating your own mandala and, for that purpose, **I have included a blank circle with a center, which is ready for you to complete (next page)**. There is no right or wrong way to draw a mandala, because it is an expression of you, and the way you interpret it is all that counts, and everyone who views it will probably interpret it differently.

I have found that drawing a circle around the center point (any size) is a good place to start, and, if you want to create a **healing mandala** for yourself, you might want to use this center area to indicate your current situation or feelings. The symbol doesn't have to be an actual picture of anything; it might be symbolized in your mind by a color. Each color has its own significance in the minds of each of us. You could move from that center point to the left and think of a past time when things were different (for better or worse) and to the right for what you would like to see in your future. You might move up from center and meditate on changes you might like to see in your life and maybe down to contemplate reasons you may have for making these changes. These are just suggestions, and, as you can probably see, it's the process that's important, not the product. You are "virtually" taking a walk on your journey to a better understanding of yourself, coming from where you are and where you have been.

If you want to try your hand at a **teaching mandala**, you could pick a particularly meaningful scripture passage and analyze it, thinking of an object that in your mind could be used to depict this scripture. This could be your "center", and from there you can move outward and expand upon your subject. You may be surprised as you meditate on this object, how many ways you can see to develop it into a meaningful artistic representation.

Even coloring geometric mandalas which can be found in mandala coloring books can be a real source of relaxation for people as they meditate while working on them or after completion. You may decide that you want to construct a geometric mandala of your own once you have tried your hand at a few of them. It is an amazingly absorbing experience.



## IMAGERY ON WORSHIP MANDELAS

### Tree of Life

Trees were revered in Celtic Europe because they were the source of the essentials necessary to sustain life for these ancient people--from fruits, nuts and berries to firewood and game birds and animals that inhabited their branches. A large tree was left standing in each community beneath whose branches ceremonies of tribal importance were celebrated. Even in those early times, or maybe especially in those early times, they spent much time observing nature, and the tree appeared to them to be a connection between the world they lived in and the earth beneath their feet, which produced, rather magically, each year at the same time, products which they required to survive. The branches that reached up to the sky were thought to be their connection to that world above them where they believed spirits existed who provided them with sunlight, moonlight, rain, snow and wind and caused the seasons to change and gave them life-giving and life-sustaining water, which in turn produced the fish and other aquatic creatures they harvested. These "Trees of Life" appeared to be just that for these primitive peoples. They considered trees to be the guardians of their lives. Their warrior leaders often carried a branch from the community tree into battle with them as a talisman to bring them victory. Of course, this Tree of Life image carried over into our Bible too, with references to it occurring from Genesis to Revelations. These peoples were the earliest ecologists, literally worshipping these "living" and life-giving elements in their world. In the process of taking the actions necessary to stay alive and assure the survival of their families, they came to appreciate and rely on the "community" to which they belonged and later began a division of labor so each person performed specific jobs which benefitted the group.

### Chambered Nautilus

This small, seemingly insignificant creature who creates this beautiful, perfectly proportioned shell that has become a symbol of beauty, is in my mind a metaphor for our life's journey, with its spiral of milestones. This tiny arthropod begins life in one small chamber, but as it grows, it seals off that room and moves upward and builds a new and bigger home. It, as we humans should do, always focuses on its goal of building a better life and uses its knowledge of the past to build a better home for today and tomorrow. The Chambered Nautilus shows us what great things we can accomplish with patience and perseverance. As different as human and arthropod appear to be on the surface, if we concentrate on our similarities rather than our differences, it will result in a greater awareness of ourselves and others.

### Communion

The communion mandala has as its central image the communion loaf. The 12 apostles are gathered around Christ, depicted as The Bread of Life. They in turn are surrounded by a diverse group, all belonging to Christ's body, and all are coming in unity, joined hand-in-hand to share in the family meal. The communion chalice is above them, being filled directly from the grape clusters encircling them, intensifying the feeling of communion with Christ and one another experienced as they participate in this sacramental meal.

### Waterfall

Anyone who has gazed at a magnificent waterfall has witnessed a very powerful force with an almost unbelievably abundant quantity of water flowing continually with no sign of decreasing in force or volume, and then plunging thunderously down into a pool below where, within a short distance, it becomes just ripples that spread into calm waters. With the renewal of your baptism, you receive something even more powerful. The power of God's grace is a never-ending flow of love that can bring you peace and contentment and, at the same time, a surge of energy and determination to fulfill your purpose as a member of Christ's body.

### Hearts

The heart is a universal symbol of all of the aspects of love--that is passionate devotion, romantic, friendship, empathy, compassion, camaraderie and courage. Many ancient societies believed that the mind and the soul were encased in the heart, so that the heart controlled the higher functions of the body involving reason and moral judgement. The heart mandala includes hearts which are similar in shape and size but are made from different colored fabrics printed with different designs. But the gold cording holds them together, arranged inside a single circle, just as we, though all different in many ways, are joined together by the love of Christ, which has no beginning and no end. Also, we are reminded that in our relationships with others--both friends and strangers-- we should speak and act from a place of love within, focusing on our similarities rather than our differences.

### The Celtic Cross

The Cross has been the most easily recognized symbol of Christ's body through the ages. It has taken many forms and shapes, but

the Celtic Cross with its interwoven Celtic knots, found most often in Ireland represents one of the most popular designs. The **Celtic High Crosses** date from about 750-1150 A.D. They are distinguished by a circle encompassing the intersection of the vertical and horizontal arms. These early crosses were made from large pieces of sandstone, some as tall as 15 to 18 feet. Because of the weight of the cross arms, they had a tendency to break, especially as they aged, so the circle was added to assist in their support. The most decorative crosses were carved on all four faces of both arms with various scenes, usually stories from the Bible. These were organized in multiple panels, with Old Testament stories on one face and New Testament scenes on the opposite face. There is one High Cross on which is carved a series of labyrinths with a ball seen just entering the labyrinth at its outside edge to begin its journey to the center. I think this early artist was trying to convey the message that the deceased person was just beginning his journey in the next life, having completed this life. Some of the crosses are decorated with geometric symbols of the period, such as spirals of various types and the interwoven designs called Celtic Knots, rather than pictures. They are all unique and fascinating structures, and some even portray humorous tales from the deceased person's life. They dot the Irish countryside today, but many of the largest and most intricately carved have been gathered together in a central site, due largely to increasing occurrences of vandalism or neglect. It is more convenient for tourists to enjoy them there, something to which I can testify, having climbed over fences in the middle of nowhere to see and photograph a cross with cattle moving around me, sometimes too close to suit me, not knowing how they view foreigners.

### Peacock

The peacock is an ancient symbol found in many cultures worldwide. It has had many different meanings, depending on the religion, but the most prevalent ones are eternal life, resurrection, renewal, immortality and incorruptibility (meaning the flesh does not decompose). The resurrection symbolism derives from the fact that the peacock molts regularly and seasonally and loses its beautiful and distinctive tail feathers, only to grow new, more splendid ones. Early Christians believed that the many eyes in its ornate tail feathers were the all-seeing eyes of God. The only flaws in the peacock's beauty are its ugly legs and feet, which have been used by spiritual leaders to show that people should not display vanity no matter how wealthy or highly ranked in society, because we all have flaws and imperfections of which we should strive to rid ourselves.

## OTHER CELTIC DESIGNS

The **Spiral**, moving counter-clockwise from a center point, was used by the Pre-Celtic and Celtic tribes of Northern Europe, especially Ireland, probably as a representation of the Sun. This symbol is found on rock sculptures at many Dolmens (worship sites) and gravesites and in passage tombs, most notably found today at the Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth Passage Tombs at the Bru' na Bo'inne Center in County Meath. The sign was apparently used also to represent the travel of the soul from this life to the next. At the passage tombs, on the day of the Winter Solstice, it was believed that when the sun shone through the opening in the wall, which only occurred at a specific time on that date, the souls of the persons who had died during that year and been entombed there, departed this world and were taken to the next world on the sun's rays.

The **Triskele** symbol, composed of a three-pronged, clock-wise spiral running through a common center, is a symbol of the Trinity in Christian religions.

A **Labyrinth** is a spiral with breaks, often referred to as a maze, and is often used symbolically to represent the faith journey of Christians and can be walked while meditating, as a method of achieving enlightenment.

The **Celtic Knot** is the unbroken, series of overlapping and interwoven knots and loops with no beginning and no end found repeatedly in Celtic designs and carved on the Irish High Crosses. The knot may be composed of a single strand that criss-crosses itself over and over or can be composed of two or more strips weaving among themselves.