The New Coat of arms and Seal of St. Ambrose Catholic Church

Heraldry, the science and art of coats of arms, exists first and foremost to identify a person, place or institution. This may take the form of some striking combination of colors—coats of arms, after all, began as a means to identify friend from foe in the chaos of battle—a symbol of some ideal the bearer held dear, or even a visual pun. A heraldic seal usually consists of the coat of arms itself, a border or frame, often including the name of the bearer around the rim, and perhaps some artistic embellishments to tie these together. In this instance, the new coat of arms consists of the shield alone. The technical heraldic description of this is called a blazon, and runs as follows, using a vocabulary partially adapted from archaic French: *Argent, a cross between four bees gules, charged with a crozier in pale or; on a chief azure, three ancient crowns or, lined gules, jeweled and set with pearls proper on the circlet.* This means the main portion of the shield is white or silver (*argent*), with a red (*gules*) cross set between four bees, and marked by an upright (in pale) gold crozier. The upper third of the shield (*chief*) is blue (*azure*); in this instance, a golden (*or*) ancient crown—a somewhat flexible term—means one with three upright points resembling fleurs-de-lys.

While there is never a single, universal way to read heraldic symbolism, there are numerous precedents which shape the selection of elements for a coat of arms. In this instance, we sought to express St. Ambrose’s work as a defender of orthodox teaching, particularly the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, and as a pastor and teacher. The heavenly blue above and the blood-red below suggests the divine and the human natures of Christ; the three golden crowns represent the Trinity, and the red cross Christ’s sacrifice. A red cross on white remains one of the traditional symbols of Milan, where he was bishop, which is also recalled by the gold crozier, its crook to curb the wayward, its staff to direct, and its point to encourage. The four bees recall Ambrose’s traditional symbol of a beehive; bees are said to have landed on his mouth as a child without harming him, and prefiguring his reputation as an eloquent preacher. They are also symbols of the Christian faithful—the virtues of the orderly, productive hive—and of the sweetness of Christ’s forgiveness. The shield shape chosen here is inspired by Italian examples, appropriate for a Lombard saint, but is merely a matter of artistic license rather than a fixed part of the coat of arms.

The pillar and streamers behind the shield are also not part of the coat of arms but are purely decorative from a heraldic perspective. Nonetheless, the pillar is meant to refer to one of the two columns that still stand on either side of the nave of the Basilica of Sant’ Ambrogio in Milan, where the saint’s body is now enshrined, one topped with a bronze serpent, the other with a cross.