

Understanding “The Temple of the Lord” as Our Place of Worship

[The first of a series of articles on the Orthodox Sanctuary
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*One thing have I desired and that will I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord. (Psalm 27:4)
O Lord, I love the habitation of Thy house,
and the place where Thy glory dwells (Psalms 26:8)*

“The church,” is very often what we say when we speak of the “House of God” or our place of worship. However, the word “church” (Greek: *ekklesia*) refers to the people of God: all who are baptized into Christ (I Corinthians 12:13), the inheritors and members of “The New Covenant” (see Hebrews 8:7f); God’s faithful. The sanctuary is the place where the faithful gather and assemble as commanded in scripture (Hebrews 10:25). It is the place where regular scriptural lessons are taught and where offerings are made; what we call: The Divine Liturgy, along with other Sacraments and prayer services.

God’s house is a house of prayer. We enter it with reverence, prepare to listen, but also anticipate participating as members of the Body of Christ by virtue of Holy Baptism and Chrismation. Its space is a sacred space; different from any other gathering or private space. This was established from the most earliest period recorded in the bible as a “holy place,” a sanctuary where the “Lord of Hosts” (Hebrew: *shekeina* glory), “The Lord Almighty” dwelt. It is where the Thrice-holy Hymn (“The Trisagion Hymn”) is

sung, based upon the text of Isaiah the Prophet (Isaiah 6:1-3). It is one of the earliest scriptural evidences that testifies that the God of Israel is a Holy Trinity.

There are three (3) main sections of an Orthodox church building:

1) the place of the Holy Altar (most often called “the altar”) located behind a screen of Holy Icons that contains three (3) doors and curtains used by the clergy; the center of which is called: “The Royal Doors” through which only the bishop, priest, and deacon enters and exits, and from which Holy Communion is administered. The space of the holy altar is designated for those who are ordained or who are permitted to serve at the services. It contains the Holy Altar (at the center), a “table of preparation” (*prothesis*), (to the left of center) where the bread offerings are prepared for the Eucharistic service, and where prayers for the living and departed faithful are made with commemorations. Behind the Holy Altar is the “high place” or the primary location of the bishop’s throne. High above it is an apse where the image of the Holy Virgin (*Platitera*) “She who is more spacious than the heavens” is depicted: The Holy Theotokos and birth giver of the Divine Son of God. The altar area is also where the reserved Sacraments of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Holy Chrism, and the Holy Unction are kept.

2) the nave includes: a) the *solea*, (a raised platform) where the *cathedra* (place where one of the bishop’s throne is located [originally: the throne of the emperor of the empire], and the place where an “altar table” is placed for the administering of Sacraments (i.e., Baptism and Holy Matrimony). The area of the *solea* in the nave is also the vicinity for the Sacrament of Holy Confession. b) In a proper Byzantine structure the front of the nave on the north and south sides of the building (left and right) includes two (2) extensions with apses - which together with the altar apse (facing East) forms the shape of the cross for the building’s footprint. Two (2) choirs originally served under these apses singing antiphonal responses in the services. Today, churches position the choir of singers under the north apse (to the left) and a choir of chanters under the south apse (to the right), near the throne of the bishop. The iconostasis that borders the nave from the altar area has a historical development of its own, however, for our purposes it is enough to say that a minimum of four (4) major icons are paired in order from right to left. They are: Christ (His second coming) to the south (right); The Holy Theotokos (depicting Christ’s first coming) to the north (left); St. John the Baptizer to the south (right), where the position of the font of Holy Baptism is appropriately placed; and the parish patron on the north (left). On the “Royal Doors” at center is the icon of the Holy Annunciation. There are many varieties of other icons placed in order, if not layered, over and alongside those already mentioned, some of them include: the icon of the Mystical (Last) Supper, the icons of the Holy Apostles, venerable saints and the Feasts of the Church. c) In large churches, most commonly cathedrals, a high or elevated pulpit (Hebrew: *bema*) is on the north (left) side of the *solea* where the lesson of the Holy Gospel is read and taught. This “bema” was at first located at the very center of the great basilicas of the early period, where the bishop first positioned himself upon

arriving for vesting. d) the forward part of the nave is crowned by a dome that depicts the icon of Christ (Greek: *Pantocrator*), or “He Who Is over all.” The wording of the traditional inscription among others on the circumference of the icon are: “Look down from heaven, O Lord, and bless this vineyard which Thou has established.” Beneath the icon, depending upon whether or not there is space between windows along the base of the dome, are often images of the Holy Prophets. Donning the four (4) main structural supports of the dome are the icons of the four (4) Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. e) the main and central part of the nave is the place where the people, facing East, stand (or sit); allowing there to be three (3) rows for processions and entrances.

3) the narthex is located at the West end where one first enters the church building (sometimes called “the vestibule”). It is the place where one is robed before entering the sanctuary. It was in the early period of the church the area where those preparing for Holy Baptism (catechumens and penitents) remained during the services and were baptized before entering and participating in the full Sacramental life of the church. Some churches today have returned to placing the position of the baptismal font (with a chapel) in the area of the narthex. The narthex is also where many prayer services of the church (i.e., The Hours, Compline etc.) took place, and where some continue being done at some monasteries. The narthex is not a “lobby” or a place for people to socialize. As a part of the church building it properly provides a place(s) for prayer with icons and a place(s) for offerings and candles.

It is very important to understand that the church sanctuary is the place where we celebrate believing that we share and participate in the fullness of God’s Kingdom together with the saints of all ages: “every righteous spirit that has completed this life in faith.” It is the reason why all that is done Sacramentally (weddings, baptisms, funerals, etc.) take place with the liturgical prayers in an Orthodox church building and not elsewhere. It is also the reason why we take great care in its construction, as every aspect of its interior design, overall structure and images depict something beyond our world. It is our window into heaven while on earth, the place where we have a glimpse of God’s eternal Kingdom and most certainly the place where He is present.

Prayer Said Upon Entering God’s House

But as for me, in the multitude of Thy mercies, I will enter into Thy house
and I will worship towards Thy Holy Temple in Thy fear. Lead me, O Lord,
in Thy justice: because of my enemies direct my way in Thy sight,
that with a clear conscience I may glorify the One Godhead in three persons:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.