

House of God

House of God: An Explanation of the Interior of Orthodox Churches

by Rev. Thomas Fitzgerald

The visitor to an Orthodox Church is usually impressed by the unique features and the external differences between this place of worship and those of the various traditions of Western Christianity. The rich color, distinctive iconography and beauty of the interior of an Orthodox Church generally are in sharp contrast to the simplicity which one finds in many Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. When one enters the interior of the Orthodox church it is like stepping into a whole new world of color and light. The art and design of the church not only create a distinctive atmosphere of worship, but also they reflect and embody many of the fundamental insights of Orthodoxy.

Beauty and Symbols

The Orthodox Church believes that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. The Creator is present through His creative energies of His handiwork. This means that the material world, being valuable and good, is an important means through which God expresses Himself. The Orthodox Church affirms this conviction through her extensive use of material creation not only for the embellishment of her places of worship, but also in her sacramental mysteries and services. For example, when the bread and wine – “the first fruits of creation” – are offered in the Eucharist, they are also a symbolic offering of all creation to God its Creator. Since there is no hesitation in using the gifts of creation, the interior of an Orthodox church is frequently very beautiful. Designed to create an atmosphere which is special, the building is filled with a feeling of joy and an appreciation of God’s bounty. Orthodoxy recognizes that beauty is an important dimension of human life. Through iconography and church appointments, the beauty of creation becomes a very important means of praising God. The divine gifts of the material world are shaped and fashioned by human hands into an expression of beauty which glorifies the Creator. As the pious woman poured her most precious oil on the feet of Our Lord, Orthodoxy seeks always to offer to God what is best and most beautiful.

Sacred Space

The interior church is most importantly, both the background and the setting for Orthodox worship. The art and architecture are designed to contribute to the total experience of worship, which involves one’s intellect, feelings, and senses. The Eucharist and the other sacramental mysteries take place in God’s midst, and they bear witness to His presence and actions. Therefore, in the Orthodox tradition there is a very strong feeling that the church is the House of God and the place where His glory dwells. For this reason, all Orthodox churches are blessed, consecrated and set aside as sacred space. The whole church bears witness to God’s indwelling among His people. As one old admonition says:

“Let the Christian consider well when he enters the church that he is entering another heaven. That same majesty of God which is in heaven is also in his church, and on this account the Christian must enter with reverence and awe.”

Ideally, an Orthodox church is relatively small in order to emphasize and enhance the sense of community in worship. The church is generally constructed in the form of a cross and is divided into three areas: the narthex, the nave, and the sanctuary. The narthex is the entrance area. Centuries ago this area was the place where catechumens (unbaptized learners) and penitents remained during parts of the services. Today, the beginning of the Baptismal service and in some parishes, the Marriage service, begins in the narthex and proceeds into the nave. This procession symbolically represents a gradual movement into the Kingdom of God. In many Orthodox parishes, the narthex is the area where the faithful make an offering, receive a candle, light it before an icon, and offer a personal prayer before joining the congregation. The nave is the large center area of the church. Here the faithful gather for worship. Although most Orthodox churches in this country have pews, some follow the old custom of having an open nave with no seats. On the right-hand side of the nave is the bishop's throne from which he presides as a living icon of Christ among his people. Even in the bishop's absence, the throne reminds all that the parish is not an isolated entity but is part of a diocese which the bishop heads. On the left-hand side of the nave is the pulpit from which the Gospel is proclaimed and the sermon preached. The choir and the cantors frequently occupy areas on the far sides of the nave. The sanctuary is considered the most sacred part of the church, and the area reserved for the clergy and their assistant. The sanctuary contains the Holy Altar and is separated from the nave by the Iconostasion. This division serves to remind us that God's reign is not complete and that we often find ourselves 'separated' from God, through sin. However, during the Divine Liturgy, when we have access to the Holy Gifts, we are reminded that, through Christ, heaven and earth are united and that through Him, we have access to the Father. It should be noted that not all services take place within the sanctuary. Many are celebrated in the center of the nave, in the midst of the congregation. In so doing, Orthodoxy emphasizes the fact that the worship of the Church is offered by, and for all the people.

The Altar

The Altar or Holy Table is the heart and focal point of the Orthodox Church. It is here that eucharistic gifts of bread and wine are offered to the Father as Christ commanded us to do. The altar, which is usually square in shape, stands away from the wall and is often covered with cloths. A tabernacle, with reserved Holy Communion for the sick or dying, is set upon the Altar, together with candles. When the Divine Liturgy is not being celebrated, the Book of Gospels rests on the Altar. Behind the Altar is a large cross with the painted figure of Christ.

Iconostasion

The Iconostasion is the panel of icons which separates the sanctuary from the nave. The origin of this very distinctive part of an Orthodox church is the ancient custom of placing icons on a low wall before the sanctuary. In time, the icons became fixed on a standing wall, hence the term iconostasion. In

contemporary practice, the Iconostasion may be very elaborate and conceal most of the sanctuary, or it may be very simple and open. The Iconostasion has three entrances which are used during services. There is a Deacon Door on either side, and the center entrance which is called the Royal Door. A curtain or door, usually conceals the Altar when services are not being celebrated. On the right-hand side of the Iconostasion are always the icons of Christ and St. John the Baptist. On the left-hand side are always the icons of the Theotokos (Mother of our Lord) and the patron saint or event to which the church is dedicated. In addition to these icons, others may be added, depending upon custom and space.

Icons

An icon is a holy image which is the distinctive art form of the Orthodox Church. In actual practice the icon may be a painting of wood, on canvas, a mosaic or a fresco. Icons depict such figures as Christ, Mary the Theotokos, the saints and angels. They may also portray events from the Scriptures or the history of the Church, such as Christmas, Easter, etc. Icons occupy a very prominent place in Orthodox worship and theology. The icon is not simply decorative, inspirational, or educational. Most importantly, it signifies the presence of the individual depicted. The icon is like a window which links heaven and earth. When we worship we do so as part of the Church which includes the living and the departed. we never lost contact with those who are with the Lord in glory. This belief is expressed every time one venerates an icon or places a candle before it. Many Orthodox churches have icons not only on the iconostasion but also on the walls, ceilings, and in arches. Above the sanctuary in the apse, there is very frequently a large icon of the Theotokos and the Christ Child. The Orthodox Church believes that Mary is the human being closest to God. This very prominent icon recalls her important role in the Incarnation of the Son of God. The icon is also an image of the Church. It reminds us of our responsibility to give birth to Christ's presence in our lives. High above the church, in the ceiling or dome, is the icon of Christ the Almighty, the Pantocrator. The icon portrays the Triumphant Christ who reigns as Lord of heaven and earth. As one gazes downward, it appears as though the whole church and all of creation comes from Him. As one looks upward, there is the feeling that all things direct us to Christ the Lord. He is the "Alpha and the Omega," the beginning and the end. This is the message of Orthodoxy.