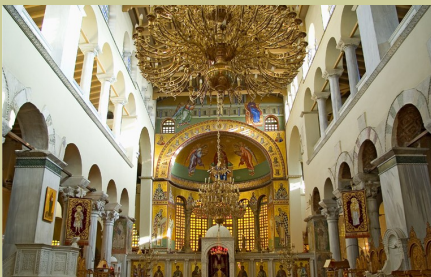


vas, a mosaic or a fresco. Icons depict such figures as Christ, Mary the Theotokos, the saints and angels. They may also portray events from the Scriptures or the history of the Church, such as Christmas, Easter, etc. Icons occupy a very prominent place in Orthodox worship and theology. The icon is not 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.

Iconostasis

The Iconostasis 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 iconostasis.



Cathedral of St. Demetrios,
Thessalonica, Greece

In contemporary practice, the Iconostasis may be very elaborate and conceal most of the sanctuary, or it may be very simple and open. The Iconostasis 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 closes the Royal Door when services are not being celebrated. On the right-hand side of the Iconostasis are the icons of Christ and St. John the Baptist. On the left-hand side are the icons of the Mother of God 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.

Text modified from "Treasures of Orthodoxy" series by Rev. Thomas Fitzgerald, and used courtesy of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.



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Exploring Inside an Orthodox Church



“One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple.”

Psalm 26 (27): 4

Inside an Orthodox Church



Church of Holy Wisdom,
Istanbul, Turkey

When one enters the interior of an 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. Since there is no hesitation in using the gifts of creation, the interior of an Orthodox church is 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. Through iconography and decoration, 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.

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.

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 and in many Orthodox parishes 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. On the right-hand side of the nave is the bishop's throne from which



Transfiguration Monastery,
Mount Tabor, Israel

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 larger community which the bishop heads.

The sanctuary is considered the

most sacred part of the church, and the area reserved for the clergy and their assistants. The sanctuary contains



Clergy celebrating a divine
service together

the Holy Altar and is separated from the nave by the Iconostasis.

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.

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 can-

For Further Information

Our Archdiocese: www.goarch.org

Our Metropolis: atmetropolis.org

Recommended Sites:

www.patriarchate.org/patriarchate/tour

www.stphotios.com/chapel.html

www.imageandlikeness.com