

Lesson 7B: The Church Building

The Church is a mystic link between earth and Heaven, and so worship experienced in the Church is in response to this reality and points us to this reality. The Church building, the ordering of the divine services, their actions, movements, images, smells, prayers, and readings all act as a guide to lead us into the Throne Room, granting access to the Inaccessible.

Basic Layout

A basic Orthodox Church building is composed of three main spaces: a narthex, nave, and Sanctuary. These spaces are arranged adjacent to each other along an axis aligned West (the narthex and entry) to East (the Sanctuary), and are demarcated or separated from each other by means of walls or screens. The East-West orientation can be interpreted in several ways. It symbolizes the movement of the worshipper from the darkness of sin (the West) into the Light of Truth (the East). The Sanctuary lies to the East of the nave because Christ, the Light of the World, is symbolized by the rising sun. Or, as worshippers, we look for Christ to come again from the East (cf. Isaiah 41, Ezekiel 43).

Narthex

The narthex serves as the initial space on entry into the building and (at least traditionally) is used by the catechumens (candidates for Holy Baptism), energumens (demoniacs), penitents, non-Orthodox, and seekers who are not properly admitted amongst the congregation; it also served as a place for the poor and the lame to sit and ask for alms. In most churches today, the narthex has lost this function and so should properly be only referred to as a vestibule (entry); it also now serves as a place to find catechetical materials, candles (a necessary part of Orthodox Worship), and a tray or box used to collect donations.

Nave

The nave, architecturally, is the central, open space of a church. Although it is usually the largest space in the church, ideally it remains a relatively small space in order to emphasize and enhance the sense of community in worship. Traditionally the nave is the space reserved for baptized worshippers (choir, chanters, readers, and parishioners) in good standing. The name is derived from the Latin *navis*, a ship. In traditional Orthodox Churches, unlike Protestant or typical Roman churches, there are no pews; Scripturally and by the teachings of the Church Fathers worshippers stand before God (except at certain explicit moments of instruction or Psalm reading). However, chairs (newer churches), benches, or *stacidia* (like a high chair with a fold up seat with arm rests high enough to be used while standing) may be located along the west side or perimeters of the nave for use by the aged or infirm. In small monastery churches *stacidia* also provide a place to stand out of the way of monks performing liturgical duties, while symbolically they represent the coffin of the monk. Near the front of the nave is found the *amvon*, a raised platform from which the Gospels are read, sermons are preached and Holy Communion is offered. Other appointments include icons, murals, candle stands, lamps, and a chandelier (*horos*).

Sanctuary

The Sanctuary is the entire space surrounding the main altar table, the side altar (*prothesis*) where the bread and wine for the Liturgy are prepared, the *diakonikon*

where liturgical books, relics, and vestments are kept, and the seats for the clergy and the throne or *cathedra* for the bishop. The Sanctuary is separated from the nave by an iconostasis, and is a space reserved for the clergy (subdeacons, deacons, priests, and bishops). An apse is generally used to close the back of the Sanctuary.

Church Architectural Styles

Linear or Tripartite (Basilica)

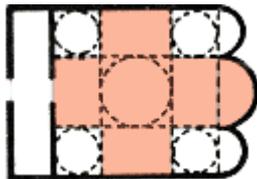
These churches are generally long and narrow, much like a ship (recall also the derivation of the word nave discussed above). And since life on earth can also be likened to a stormy sea, where we are tossed and turned by troubles and temptations, the Church is the ship which will bring us to the Heavenly Harbor.

Cruciform

The shape of the Worship space in these churches is a cross, to remind us that we are saved by the Cross of Christ.

Cruciform Variation: Cross-in-Square

The spacial representation of the Cross is retained in the Worship space, but the physical areas between adjacent arms of the cross are enclosed by the building structure. Generally the spaces so enclosed are used in a supporting role (e.g., vestry or chapel).



Circular

A circle is the symbol of Eternity (without beginning or end), meaning that the Church, which is the Body of Christ, lives forever.

Dome

A dome is an all-embracing ceiling, revealing that in the Kingdom of God, and in the Church, “Christ unites all things in himself, things in Heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10), and that in Him we are all “filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:19).

Domes	Meaning
1	Jesus Christ
3	Trinity
5	Jesus Christ and the Four Evangelists
7	Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit
9	Nine Orders of the Heavenly Powers
13	Jesus Christ and the 12 Apostles
25	The Throne of the Trinity with the 12 Prophets and 12 Apostles alongside (cf. Revelations 4:2-4)
33	Christ's 33 years on earth

In some cases, however, the number of domes may actually be used to reflect the number of altars present in the church (main and chapels).

The colors of the domes can also have meaning. Black means submission, and is sometimes found in monasteries. Green refers to the Holy Trinity. Blue refers to Mary, the Mother of God. And gold refers to Jesus Christ. Gold domes of Russian churches are also said to be candles (which they can look like from a distance) burning up toward Heaven.

Conclusion

The church ("temple") is a special house consecrated to God — "the House of God" in which the Divine Services are conducted. In the church there abides the special grace or mercy of God, which is given to us through those who conduct the Divine Services, namely, the clergy (bishops, priests and deacons).

The external appearance of the church differs from other buildings in that there is a dome which symbolizes Heaven rising over the church. At the top of the dome is its peak, where the Cross stands, to the glory of the Head, Jesus Christ. Over the entrance to the church there is usually built a bell tower where the bells are hung. The ringing of the bells serves to summon the faithful to prayer — to the Divine Services, and to give notice of the most important parts of the service taking place in the church.

At the entrance to the church there is a porch (courtyard, or entrance way). The inside of the church is divided into three parts: 1) the narthex, 2) the church itself, or the nave, or middle part of the church, where the people stand, 3) the Altar, or Sanctuary, where the services are conducted by the clergy and where the most important part of the whole church is located — the Holy Table (Altar Table), on which the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist is celebrated.