

# ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH



House of God: An Explanation of the Interior of  
Orthodox Churches and the Iconography of the  
Assumption Church

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

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 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 of the 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

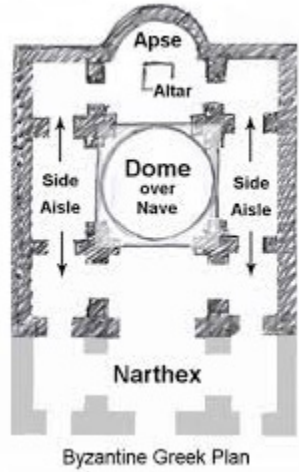
sacramental mysteries take place in God's midst, and they bear witness to His presence and actions. Therefore, in the Orthodox tradition there is a very strong feeling that the church is the House of God and the place where His glory dwells. For this reason, all Orthodox churches are blessed, consecrated 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 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 Baptismal service and the Marriage service begin in the Narthex and proceed 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. It contains 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.

## 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. The Iconostasis has three entrances which are used during services. There is a Deacon Door on both sides, 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 Iconostasis are always the icons of Christ the Teacher 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, ours being the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In addition to these icons, others may be added, depending upon custom and space.

## The Holy Altar Table

The 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. The altar stands away from the wall and is covered with a beautiful hand embroidered cloth. A Tabernacle, with the reserved Holy Communion for the sick or dying, is set upon the Altar, together with candles and the Book of Gospels. Behind the Altar Table stands a large wooden cross with the painted figure of Christ.

## Byzantine Iconography of the Assumption Church

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 on wood, on canvas, a mosaic, or a fresco. Icons depict such figures as Christ, Mary the Theotokos, the Saints and Angels. In Orthodox Iconography there is a hierarchy for the placement of icons as well as the color of their clothes. Their depictions are in keeping with the theology and dogma of the Church. They may portray holy feast days from Scripture or historical events of the Church. Icons occupy a very prominent place in Orthodox worship and theology. It is also important to understand that icons are venerated and not worshiped. 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 lose 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. Most Orthodox churches have icons not only on the Iconostasis but also on the walls, ceilings, and in arches.



## The Dome

High above the center of the church is the dome which represents God having bowed the heavens in humbling Himself to take on flesh. The central icon in the dome is of Christ the “Pantokrator,” meaning the Creator of All. 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

Omega,” the beginning and the end. He is surrounded by ministering angels—Cherubim and Seraphim. In the drum of the dome are prophets of the Old Testament who spoke of the coming of Christ. Beginning from the east and moving clockwise around the dome are Prophets: Isaiah, Elijah, Elissaios, Habakuk, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Each of them holds a scroll in his hand representing the prophecies foretelling Christ, except for Ezekiel, who was commanded by the Lord to eat his scroll. He literally consumed the Word of God. We do the same thing more perfectly every Sunday by consuming the Body and Blood of the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

## Icons in Altar Area

In the altar area, behind the side doors (also known as “Deacon’s Doors”) are icons of two of the first deacons (and martyrs) – St. Laurence and St. Stephen. Over the doors to the skevophylakion (where bread, wine, incense, and oil are stored) and the vestry (where sacred vestments are stored) are icons of the saintly Bishops Nicholas and Athanasios.

On the north side of the altar is an icon of Moses striking the rock and water flowing out from it (Exodus 17:6, Numbers 20:11). This event is a precursor of the Soldier piercing the side of Christ. Next to that is an icon of the Sacrifice of Abraham (Genesis 22:1-19). Abraham attempting, but not completing, the sacrifice of his son Isaac points to the sacrifice of the Cross. The Sacrifice of the Cross, however, is completed. Both icons share the themes of Sacrifice and Eucharist.

In the north side niche is the Altar of Preparation. The bread and wine are prepared on this altar before the Divine Liturgy in a beautiful rite that incorporates references from the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The central theme is the sacrificial lamb. The icon depicted here is of the “Extreme Humility.” It depicts Christ, in His humility, after the Crucifixion.

Above the southern apse is an icon of the Myrrhbearing Women coming to the empty tomb and being greeted by the angel. The Myrrhbearing Women were coming to anoint the Lord’s body with precious oil and prepare Him for burial. This, however, had already been accomplished by the Sinful Woman who poured out her jar of costly ointment, who washed the Lord’s feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair. So the Myrrhbearing Women couldn’t accomplish their intended task, but were rewarded with a more joyous task telling the disciples that the “Lord is Risen!”



Inside the southern niche is the “Diakonikon” (where the sacred church vessels are kept) where an icon of Melchisedek is written. He was the only priest mentioned in the Old Testament who didn’t offer animal sacrifices, but rather bread and wine, thus prophesying the Last Supper.

Flanking the central apse are icons of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great who composed many of the prayers we read in the Divine Liturgy. Below them are also lecterns that bear open scrolls with quotations attributed to each of them. The scroll on the north side reads, “No one bound by the desires and cares of the flesh is worthy to approach, or draw near, or minister to Thee, the King of Glory.” The scroll on the south side reads, “O God, our God, who didst send the Heavenly Bread, the Food of the whole world, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, to be our Savior, Redeemer and Benefactor, blessing and sanctifying us.”

## Central Apse



Above the sanctuary in the apse is a large icon of the Theotokos and the Christ Child called "More Spacious than the Heavens" because Mary contained within herself the God of All. 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.

Above the Platytera icon is an icon of the Holy Mandylion, also known as the "Veil of Veronica." According to tradition, St. Veronica met the Lord on His

way to Golgotha and wiped His face with her veil. The image of the Lord's face remained on the veil and became permanent. Thus the icon is also called "Not Made by Hands," because it is the only icon not originally written by man, it was written by Christ Himself.



## Narthex

In the Narthex, behind the candle stand, is a large icon depicting a scene from Genesis 18:1-15. The scene is of Abraham and his wife Sarah being visited by three strangers (angels) near the oaks of Mamre. The central angel represents Christ, the angel on the left represents the Father, and the angel on the right represents the Holy Spirit. The Father gives the cup, the Son blesses it and makes it holy by giving himself, and the Holy Spirit brings new life to the world (He is depicted in a green robe). The angels are seated around a cube shaped altar, with a dish in the center containing a lamb's head. The lamb represents the sufferings of Christ who will become The Passover Lamb for our Salvation.



These were the first icons applied to the walls of the sanctuary in a century; truly the hand of God has touched the community of the Assumption with His loving kindness and has bestowed a wonderful and bright future. When life is just speeding by too quickly, may those who call Assumption home find some quiet and pray for the peace that surpasses understanding. It is not surprising that God who created humans would realize that sometimes in our crowded lives it is beneficial to have a glimpse through Assumption's iconography as through a window on the Kingdom.

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