What to expect when you enter an Orthodox Church

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 are in sharp contrast to what one often 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 beliefs of Orthodoxy.

Beauty and Symbols

The Orthodox Church believes that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. The Creator is present through His handiwork. This means that the material world, being valuable and good (Genesis 1:31), is an important means through which God shows His love for us.

The Orthodox Church affirms these convictions through her extensive use of material creation not only for the embellishment of her places of worship, but also in the Holy Eucharist (Communion), the sacraments and other prayer services. For example, when the bread and wine - "the first fruits of creation" (Romans 11:16) - are offered in the Holy Eucharist, they are also a symbolic offering of all creation to God its Creator. The Holy Eucharist, known as the Divine Liturgy, is the Church’s great action and prayer of thanksgiving.

Using the gifts of creation, the interior of an Orthodox church is a place of beauty. Designed to create an atmosphere which is special, the building expresses a sense of joy and an appreciation of God's blessings. 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 the Triune 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 in the Gospel story poured her precious oil on the feet of Our Lord (Luke 8:38), Orthodoxy seeks always to offer back to God our gifts of beauty and praise.

Sacred Space

The church interior is 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 mind, feelings, and senses. The Holy Eucharist and the other sacraments take place in God's midst, and they bear witness to His presence and actions. 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.’ God is present everywhere. And, we can turn to Him in prayer in all places and circumstances. Yet, the interior of the church is designed to enable us to lift our hearts up in song and prayer. For this reason, all Orthodox churches are blessed, consecrated and set aside as sacred space designed for worship. The whole church bears witness to God's dwelling among His people.

Ideally, an Orthodox Church building is relatively small in size to emphasize and enhance the sense of community in worship. The church is generally constructed in the form of a cross and divided into three areas: the narthex, the nave, and the sanctuary. The narthex is the entrance area where the faithful make an offering, receive a candle, and place it before an icon. Here, the faithful offer a personal prayer before entering the nave and joining the congregation.

The nave is the large center area of the church where the faithful gather for worship as members of the community of faith. Although most Orthodox churches in this country have pews, some follow the custom of having an open nave with few seats. On the right-hand side of the nave is often the bishop's chair from which he presides as a living icon of Christ among his people. Even in the bishop's absence, the chair reminds all that the parish is not an isolated entity but is part of a metropolis or diocese which the bishop heads. On the left-hand side of the nave is the pulpit where the Gospel is proclaimed and the sermon is preached. Often the baptismal font is also placed in this area. The choir and the cantors frequently occupy spaces at the far sides of the nave.

The sanctuary is the most sacred part of the church, and the area reserved for clergy and their assistants. The sanctuary contains the Holy Altar and is separated from the nave by the Iconostasion.

The Altar

The Altar or Holy Table is the heart and focal point of the Orthodox church. As God's people, we gather before the Altar. There, the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine are offered to God the Father as Christ commanded us to do at the Last Supper (Luke 23:20). The Altar, which is usually square in shape, stands away from the wall and is 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 is always placed in the center of the Altar. Behind the Altar is a large cross with the painted figure of the crucified Christ. Often the chair of the bishop is also located behind the Altar.

Iconostasis

The iconostasis is the panel of icons which separates the sanctuary from the nave. Its origin is in the ancient custom of placing icons on a low wall before the sanctuary. In the course of time, the icons became fixed on a standing wall. In contemporary practice, the iconostasis may be very elaborate and conceal most of the sanctuary. Or, it may be very simple and open in accordance with more ancient custom.

Icons

An icon is a holy image which is the distinctive art form of the Orthodox Church. An icon may be a painting of wood, on canvas, a mosaic or a fresco. Occupying a very prominent place in Orthodox worship and theology, icons depict Christ Our Lord, Mary the Theotokos, the saints and angels. They may also portray events from the Scriptures or the history of the Church, such as the Birth of Christ, the Resurrection, or Pentecost.

The icon is not simply decorative, inspirational, or educational. Most importantly, it signifies the presence of the person depicted. The icon is like a window linking heaven and earth. When we worship we do so as part of the Church which includes the living and the departed. We never loose 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. Orthodox churches have icons not only on the iconostasis but also on the walls, ceilings, and in arches. Above the sanctuary in the apse, there is very frequently a large icon of Mary, the Theotokos and the Christ Child. The Orthodox Church believes that Mary is the human person closest to God. This very prominent icon recalls her important role in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. 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.

The icon of Christ the Almighty, the Pantocrator, is on the ceiling or in the dome. This icon portrays the Triumphant Christ who reigns as Lord of heaven and earth. Looking downward, it appears as though the whole church and all of creation comes from Him. Looking upward, there is the sense that all things direct us to Christ the Lord. He is the "Alpha and the Omega" (Rev. 22:13), the beginning and the end of all. This is the message of Orthodoxy.

Holy Communion

When you visit, please keep in mind that the Orthodox Church practices closed communion. This is not for triumphalistic reasons, but for very important theological reasons. In doing so we follow the practice of the ancient Church. "Open communion" is a relatively recent innovation and was not the practice of the Church beginning in the New Testament period.

All are welcome to come forward at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy to share in the antidoron - the blessed bread - which is offered to all.

We look forward to having you join us