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**THE
CHURCH BUILDING**

Church Building

In the long history of the Orthodox Church a definite style of church architecture has developed. This style is characterized by the attempt to reveal the fundamental experience of Orthodox Christianity: **God is with us.**

The fact that Christ the Immanuel (which translated means "God with us") has come, determines the form of the Orthodox church building. God is with man in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The dwelling place of God is with man. "The Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands," says St. Stephen quoting the Old Testament prophets. St. Paul says that men are the temples of God:

Christ Jesus himself (is) the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:21-22)

The words of St. Peter are very much the same.

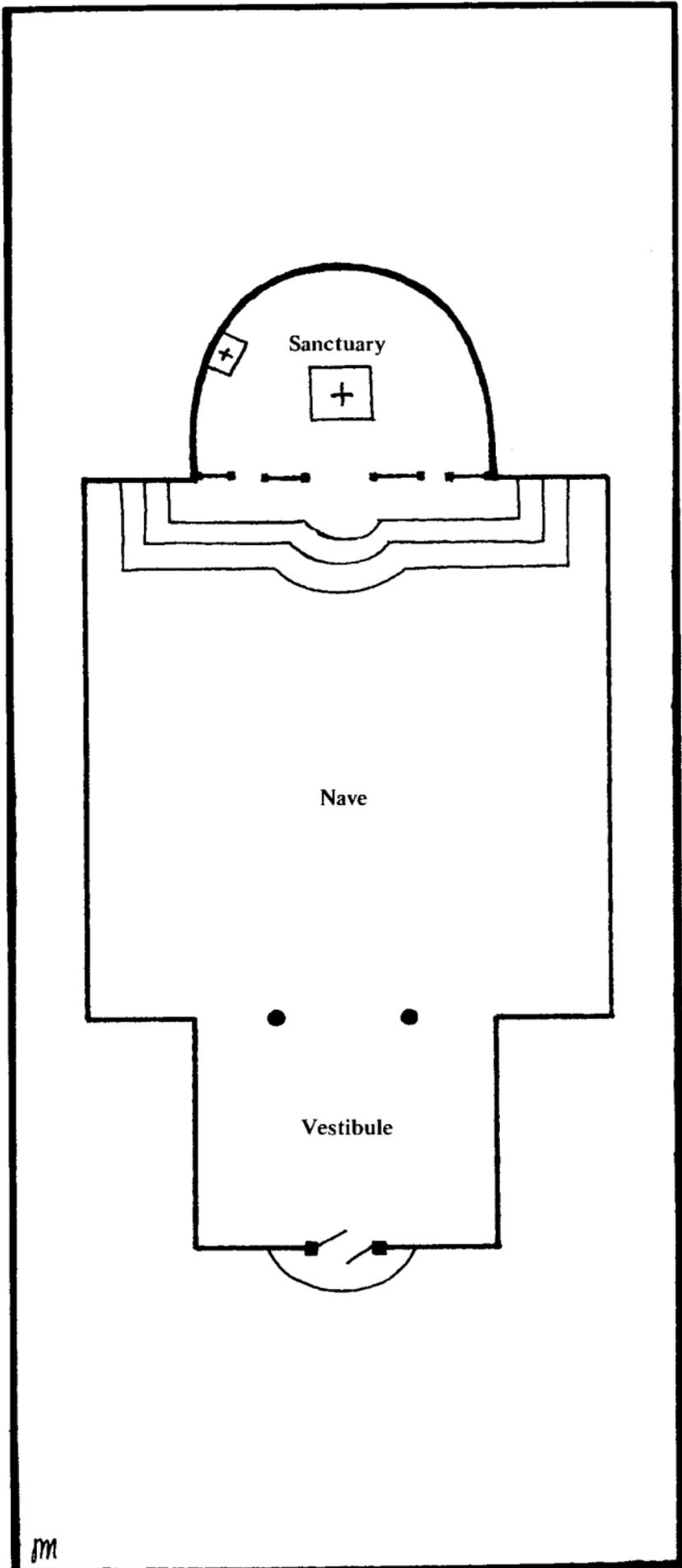
Come to him (Christ), to that living stone...and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house...to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (I Peter 2:4-5)

"We are the temple of the living God..." (II Corinthians 6:16). And it is exactly this conviction and experience that Orthodox Church architecture wishes to convey.

Orthodox Church architecture reveals that God is with men, dwelling in them and living in them through Christ and the Spirit. It does so by using the dome or the vaulted ceiling to crown the Christian church building, the house of the Church which is the People of God. Unlike the pointed arches which point to God far up in the heavens, the dome or the spacious, all-embracing ceiling gives the impression 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)

The interior of the Orthodox Church building is particularly styled to give the experience of the unity of all things in God. It is not constructed to reproduce the upper room of the Last Supper, nor to be simply a meeting hall for men whose life exists solely within the bounds of this earth. The church building is patterned after the image of God’s Kingdom in the **Book of Revelation**. Before us is the altar table on which Christ is enthroned, both as the Word of God in the Gospels and as the Lamb of God in the eucharistic sacrifice. Around the table are the angels and saints, the servants of the Word and the Lamb who glorify him—and through him, God the Father—in the perpetual adoration inspired by the Holy Spirit. The faithful Christians on earth who already belong to that holy assembly—**“...fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...”** (Ephesians 2:19)—enter into the eternal worship of God’s Kingdom in the Church. Thus, in Orthodox practice the **vestibule** symbolizes this world. The nave is the place of the Church understood as the assembly and people of God. The altar area, called the **sanctuary** or the **holy place**, stands for the Kingdom of God.



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Altar Table

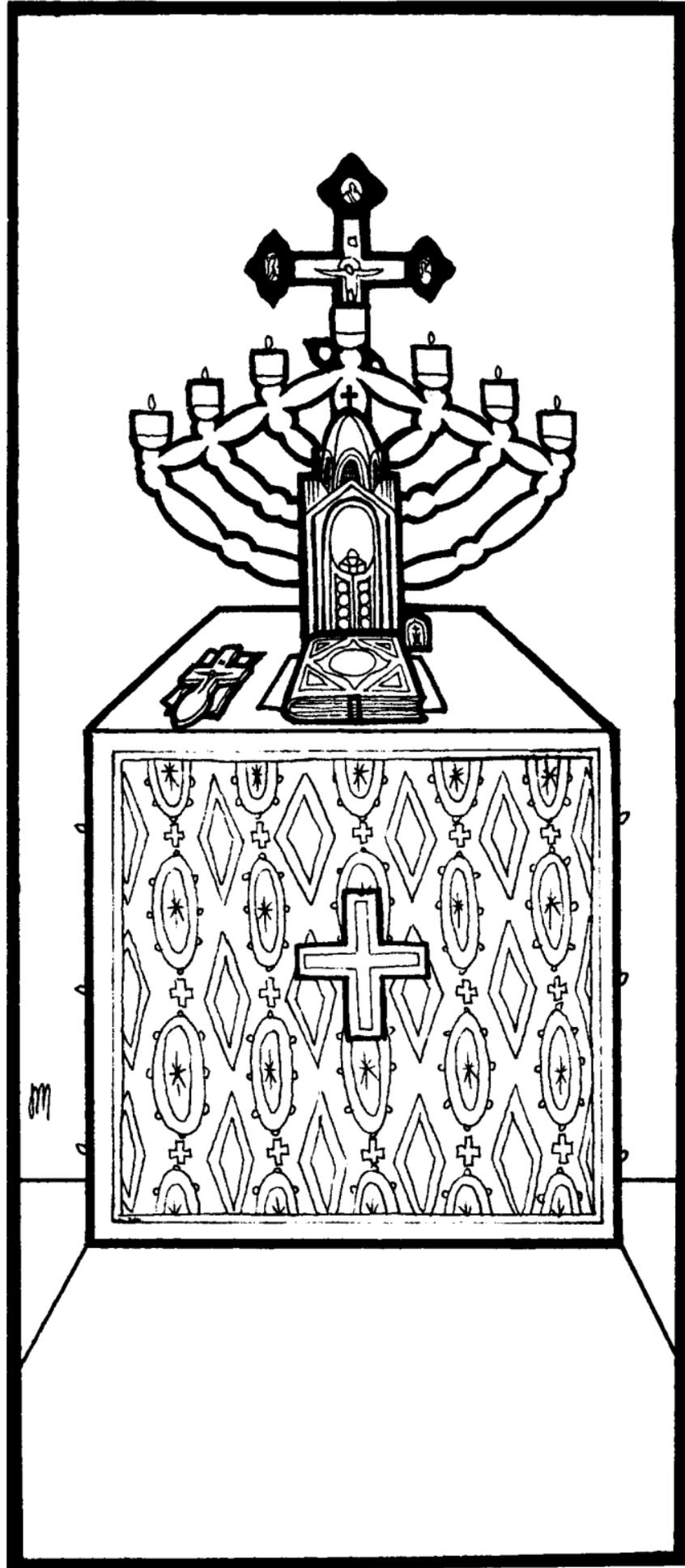
We have mentioned how the entire church building is centered around the **altar table**. The altar table does not merely symbolize the table of the last supper. It is the symbolic and mystical presence of the heavenly throne and table of the Kingdom of God; the table of Christ the Word, the Lamb and the King of the everlasting life of God's glorified dominion over all of creation.

The Book of the Gospels is perpetually enthroned on the altar table. It is on the altar table that we offer the "bloodless sacrifice" of Christ to the Father. And from the altar table we receive the Bread of Life, the Body and Blood of the Lord's Passover Supper. This table is the "table of God's Kingdom." (Luke 28:30)

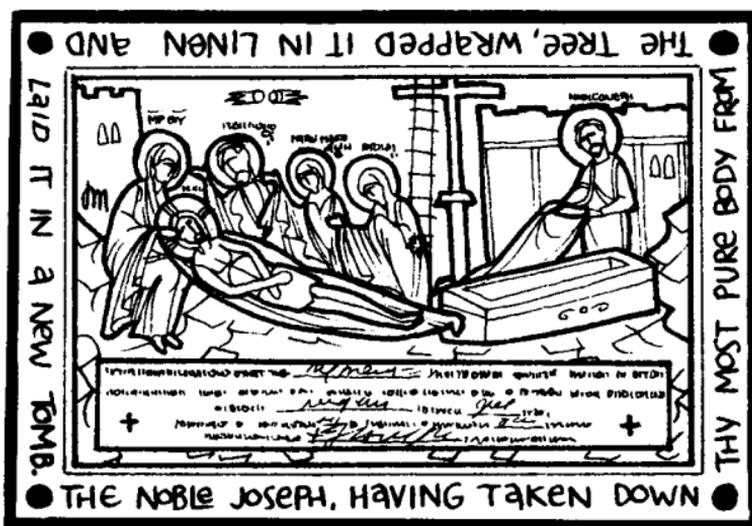
In Orthodox Tradition the altar table is often carved wood or stone. It is usually vested with colorful material to show its divine and heavenly character. It should always be a simple table of proportional dimensions, often a perfect cube, and is always free-standing so that it may be encircled.

On the altar table one always finds the **antimension**. This is the cloth depicting Christ in the tomb which contains the signature of the bishop and is the permission for the local community to gather as the Church. "Antimension" means literally "instead of the table." Since the bishop is the proper pastor of the Church, the antimension is used instead of the bishop's own table which is, obviously, in his own church building, the **cathedral**—the place where the bishop has his chair (**cathedra**).

The antimension usually contains a **relic** (normally a part of the body) of a saint which shows that the Church is built on the blood of the martyrs and the lives of God's holy people. This custom comes from the early Church practice of gathering and celebrating the eucharist on the graves of those who have lived



and died for the Christian faith. Usually, a relic of a saint is embedded in the altar table itself as well.



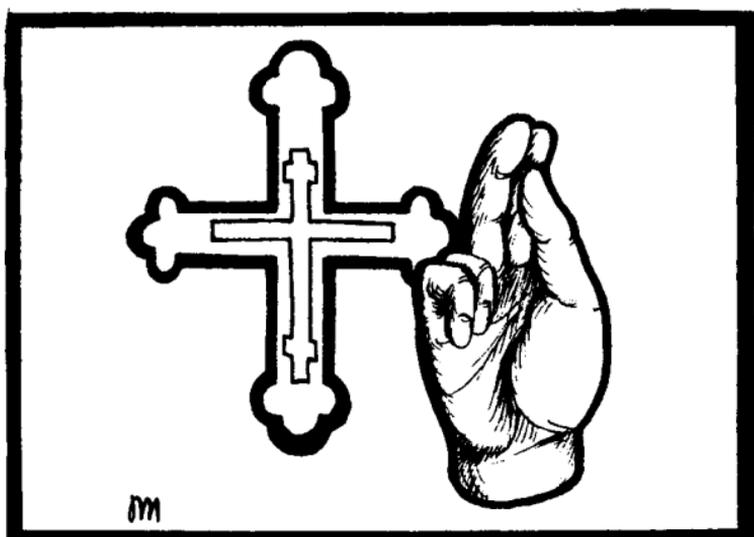
Also on the altar table there is a **tabernacle**, often in the shape of a church building, which is a repository for the gifts of holy communion that are reserved for the sick and the dying. Behind the altar table there is usually a seven-branched candle stand which comes from the Old Testamental tradition of the Jewish temple. Generally speaking, the Jerusalem temple is highly valued in the Orthodox Christian tradition of worship and church construction as a “prototype” of the true worship “in spirit and truth” of the Kingdom of God. (John 4:23)

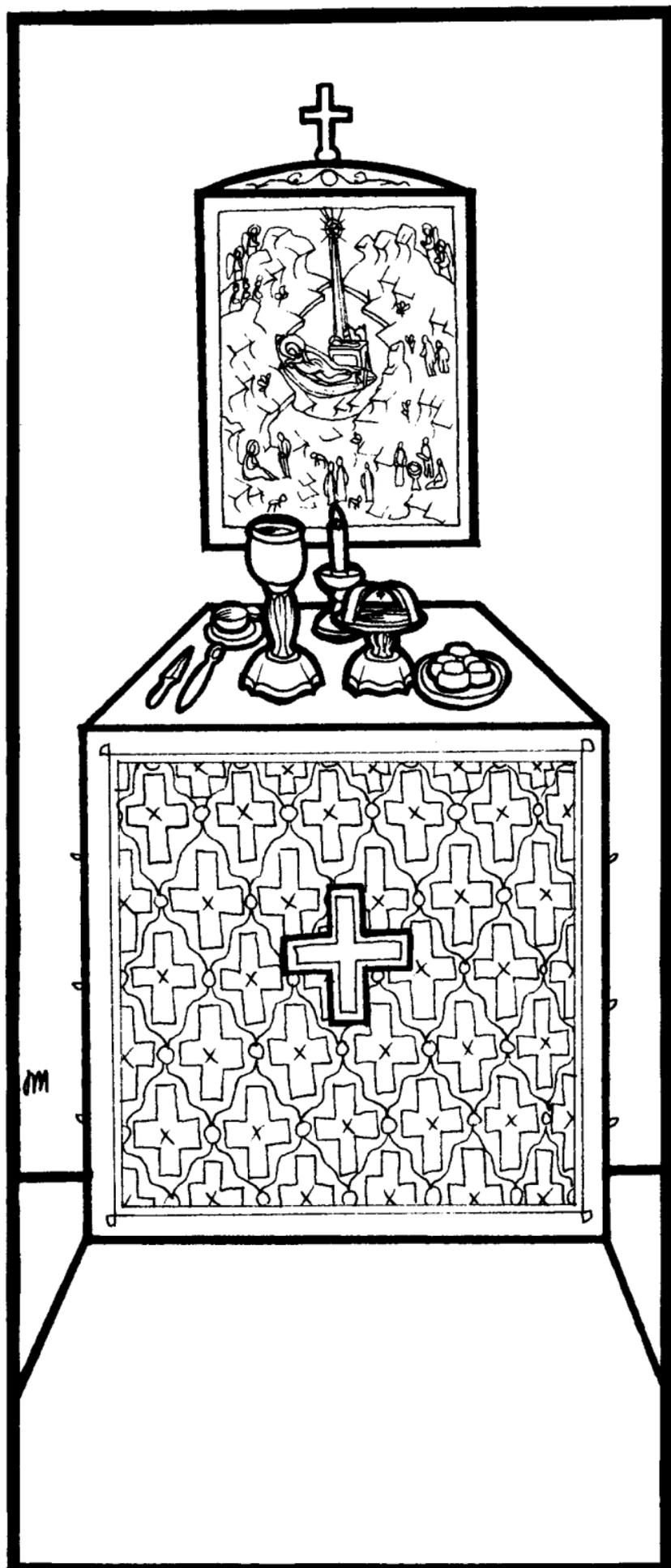
Sign of the Cross

Also found on the altar table is a small **hand cross** used for blessing and for veneration by the faithful. The sign of the cross is used throughout the church building: on the holy vessels, stands, tables, and vestments.

The cross is the central symbol for Christians, not only as the instrument of the world's salvation by the crucified Christ, but also as the constant witness to the fact that men cannot be Christians unless they live with the cross as the very content of their lives in this world. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

For these reasons Christians place upon themselves the sign of the cross. The Orthodox place their first two fingers and thumb together to form a sign of the Triune God and cross themselves from the head to the breast and from shoulder to shoulder, right to left. This unique and all-embracing symbol shows that the cross is the inspiration, power and indeed the very content of our lives as Christians; and that man's mind, heart and strength must be given to the love of God and man.





Oblation Table

As we face the altar area the **table of oblation** on which the bread and wine are prepared for the liturgy stands on the left side of the altar table. The **chalice**—the cup for the wine—and the **diskos**—the round plate, elevated on a stand, for the bread—are kept on this table. These vessels are normally decorated with iconographic engravings, Christian symbols and the sign of the cross.

On this table there is also a special liturgical knife—symbolically called the **spear**—which is used for cutting the eucharistic bread, and a liturgical **spoon** for administering holy communion to the people. There are also special covers for the chalice and diskos and a cruciform piece of metal called the **star** which holds the cover over the eucharistic bread on the diskos. A sponge and cloths for drying the chalice after the liturgy are also usually kept here. The oblation table is decorated in a manner similar to that of the altar table.

Above the **table of oblation** (the table on which the gifts for holy communion are prepared), which stands in the altar area to the left of the altar table, one might find various icons. A favorite one is that of Christ praying in Gethsemene: “Let this cup pass...” Another is that of the Nativity, although this is due to a symbolical interpretation of the Divine Liturgy which is not indicative of the fundamental liturgical tradition of the Church. (See Chapter V on the Divine Liturgy.)

Icons

In the Orthodox Church the icons bear witness to the reality of God's presence with us in the mystery of faith. The icons are not just human pictures or visual aids to contemplation and prayer. They are the witnesses of the presence of the Kingdom of God to us, and so of our own presence to the Kingdom of God in the Church. It is the Orthodox faith that icons are not only permissible, but are spiritually necessary because **"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."** (John 1:14) Christ is truly man and, as man, truly the **"icon of the invisible God."** (Colossians 1:15; I Corinthians 11:7; II Corinthians 4:4)

The iconostasis or icon screen in the Orthodox Church exists to show our unity with Christ, his mother and all the angels and saints. It exists to show our unity with God. The altar table, which stands for the Banquet Table of the Kingdom of God, is placed behind the so-called royal gates, between the icons of the Theotokos and Child and the glorified Christ, showing that everything which happens to us in the Church happens in history between those "two comings" of Christ: between his coming as the Saviour born of Mary and his coming at the end of the age as the King and the Judge.

The icons on the royal gates witness to the presence of Christ's good news, the gospel of salvation. The four evangelists who recorded the gospels appear, and often also an icon of the Annunciation, the first proclamation of the gospel in the world. (In Greek the gospel is the **evangelion**, the authors of the gospels the **evangelistoi**, the annunciation the **evangelismos**.)

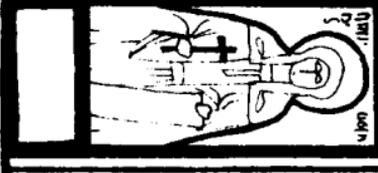
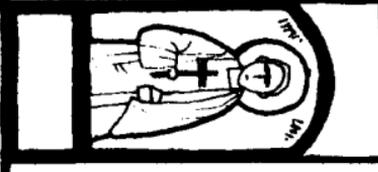
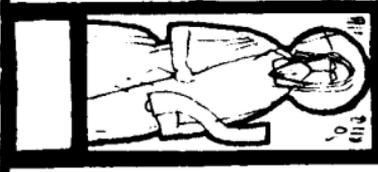
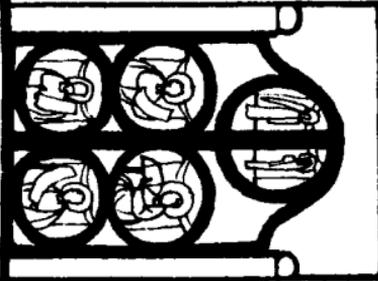
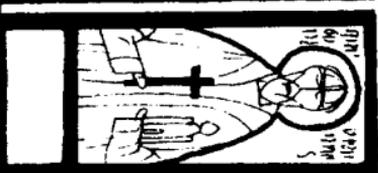
Over the doors we have the icon of Christ's Mystical Supper with his disciples, the icon of the central mystery of the Christian faith and the unity of the Church in the world. It is the visual witness that we too are partakers in the **"marriage supper of the lamb"** (Revelation 19:9), that we too are blessed by Christ "to

eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (Luke 22:30), blessed to “eat bread in the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 14:15)

Over and around the central gates are icons of the saints. The **deacon’s doors** in the first row (for the servants of the altar) usually have icons depicting deacons or angels, God’s servants. The first row also has an icon of the person or event in whose honor the given building is dedicated, along with other prominent saints or events. Depending on the size of the iconostasis, there may be rows of icons of the apostles, the major feasts of the Church, the prophets and other holy people blessed by God, all crowned on the top by the cross of Christ.

In recent centuries the iconostasis in most Orthodox churches became very ornate and developed into a virtual wall, dividing the faithful from the holy altar rather than uniting them with it. In recent years this development has happily been altered in many places. The iconostasis in many church buildings now gives first place to the icons themselves and has become once more an icon “stand” or “screen” (**stasis**) rather than a solid partition.

Besides the iconostasis, Orthodox Church buildings often have icons or frescoes on the walls and ceilings. The “**canon**” of Church design is to have the icon of Christ the Almighty in the center of the building, and the icon of the Theotokos with Christ appearing within her found over the altar area. This latter icon is called the “**image of the Church**” since Mary is herself the prototype of the entire assembly of believers in whom Christ must dwell. In the altar area it is also traditional to put icons of the saints who composed Church liturgies and hymns. Directly behind the altar table there is usually an image of Christ in glory – enthroned or transfigured or resurrecting, and sometimes offering the eucharistic gifts.



Vestments

In the Orthodox Church the clergy vest in special clothing for the liturgical services. There are two fundamental Christian vestments, the first of which is the **baptismal robe**. This robe, which is worn by bishops and priests at the service of holy communion and which should always be white, is the “robe of salvation”: the white garment in which every Christian is clothed on his day of baptism, symbolizing the new humanity of Jesus and life in the Kingdom of God. (Revelation 7:9ff)

The second fundamental vestment for Christian clergy is the **stole** or **epitrachelion** which goes around the neck and shoulders. It is the sign of the pastoral office and was originally made of wool to symbolize the sheep—that is, the members of the flock of Christ—for whom the pastors are responsible. Both bishops and priests wear this vestment when they are exercising their pastoral office, witnessing to the fact that the ministers of the Church live and act solely for the members of Christ’s flock.

As the Church developed through history the vestments of the clergy grew more numerous. Special **cuffs** for deacons, priests, and bishops were added to keep the sleeves of the vestments out of the way of the celebrants during the divine services. When putting on their cuffs, the clergy read lines from the psalms reminding them that their hands belong to God.

A special **belt** was added as well to hold the vestments in place. When putting on the belt the clergy say psalms which remind them that it is God who “girds them with strength” to fulfill their service. Only the bishops and priests wear the liturgical belt.

All orders of the clergy wear a special outer garment. Deacons, sub-deacons, and readers wear a robe called a **sticharion**. It is probably the baptismal garment, decorated and made more elaborate. Deacons and sub-deacons also wear a stole called the **orarion**,

probably originally a piece of material upon which were inscribed the liturgical litanies and prayers (**orare** means to pray). The deacon still holds up the orarion in a position of prayer when he intones his parts of the divine services. The sub-deacon's orarion is placed around his back in the sign of the cross.

Priests wear their white baptismal robe over which they have their pastoral stole, cuffs and belt. They also wear a large garment called a **phelonion** which covers their entire body in the back and goes below their waist in front. This vestment was probably developed from the formal garments of the early Christian era and, under the inspiration of the Bible, came to be identified with the calling of the priestly life. When putting on his phelonion, the priest says the lines of Psalm 132:

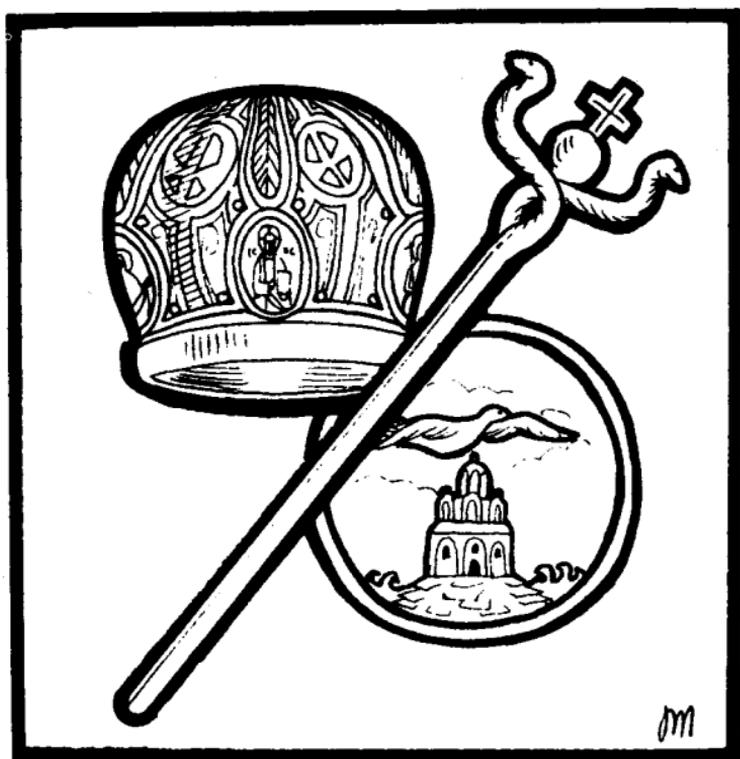
Thy priests, O Lord, shall clothe themselves in righteousness, and the saints shall rejoice with joy always now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

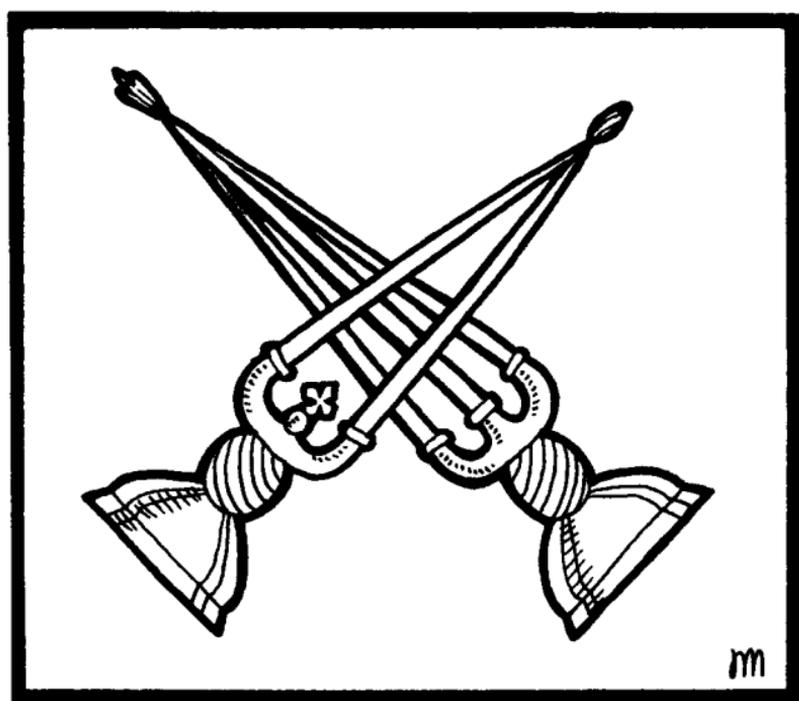
The bishops traditionally probably also wore the phelonion over which they placed the **omoforion**, the sign of their episcopal office as leading pastor of the local church. When the Christian empire was captured by the Turks in the fifteenth century, however, the Christian bishops of the East were given civil rule over all Christians under Turkish domination. At that time, since there was no longer a Christian empire, the bishops adopted the imperial insignia and began to dress as the Christian civil rulers used to dress. Thus, they began to wear the **sakkos**, the imperial robe, and the **mitre**, the imperial crown. They also began to stand upon the **orlets** (the eagle) during the divine services and to carry the **staff** which symbolized more their secular power than their pastoral office. At that time as well, the word **despota** (**vladyko** or **master**)—a title for temporal rather than spiritual



power—was used in addressing the bishops, and the clergy began to grow long hair which was also a sign of earthly rule in former times. In the seventeenth century, during the reform of Patriarch Nikon, the Russian Church adopted these same forms for its bishops.

In the Church some of these new insignia were “spiritualized” and given a Biblical meaning. Thus, the mitres became signs of Christian victory, for the saints receive their crowns and reign with Christ. (Revelation 4:4) The eagle became the sign of the flight to the heavenly Jerusalem since it is the classical Biblical symbol of St. John and the fourth gospel. (Revelation 4:7; Ezekiel 1:10) The staff became the symbol of Aaron’s rod (Exodus 4:2), and so on. It should be understood, however, that these particular insignia of the bishop’s office are of later and more accidental development in the Church.





In relation to the bishop's service in the Orthodox Church, the use of two special candelabra with which the bishop blesses the faithful also developed. One of these candelabra holds three candles (**trikiri**) while the other holds two candles (**dikiri**). These candelabra stand for the two fundamental mysteries of the Orthodox faith: that the Godhead is **three** Divine Persons; and that Jesus Christ, the Saviour, has **two** natures, being both perfect God and perfect man.

Bishops and priests in the Orthodox Church also wear other special garments. There are, first of all, two pieces of cloth: one square (**nabedrennik**) and one diamond-shaped (**epigonation** or **palitsa**). The former is worn only by priests as a sign of distinction, while the latter is always worn by bishops and is given to some priests as a special distinction of service. Probably these cloths were originally "liturgical towels." Their symbolical meaning is that of spiritual strength: the sword of faith and the Word of God. They hang at the sides of their wearers during divine services.

There are also clerical hats which carry special meaning in some Orthodox Churches—the pointed hat (*skufya*) and the cylindrical one (*kamilavka*). The *kamilavka* is normally worn by all Greek priests, but only by some clergy as a special distinction in other national Orthodox churches. The *kamilavka* may be black or purple; monks, and so the bishops, wear it with a black veil. The *skufya* is worn by monks and, in the Russian tradition, by some of the married clergy as a special distinction, in which case the hat is usually purple. Also in the Russian tradition certain married clergy are given the honor of wearing a mitre during liturgical services. In other Orthodox churches the mitre is reserved only for bishops and abbots of monasteries (*archimandrites*). Generally speaking, especially in the West, the use of clerical headwear is declining in the Orthodox Church.

Finally, it must be mentioned that bishops and priests wear the cross. The bishops also wear the image of Mary and the Child (*panagia*—the “all holy”). In the Russian tradition all priests wear the cross. In other churches it is worn liturgically only by those priests given the special right to do so as a sign of distinction.

As the various details of clerical vestments evolved through history, they became very complex and even somewhat exaggerated. The general trend in the Church today is toward simplification. We can almost certainly look forward to a continual evolution in Church vestments which will lead the Church to practices more in line with the original Christian biblical and sacramental inspiration.

The Orthodox Church is quite firm in its insistence that liturgical vesting is essential to normal liturgical worship, experienced as the realization of communion with the glorious Kingdom of God, a Kingdom which is yet to come but which is also already with us in the mystery of Christ’s Church.

Christian Symbols

The Orthodox Church abounds with the use of symbols. These symbols are those realities which have the power and competence of manifesting God to men, signs which carry us beyond ourselves and themselves into the genuine union and knowledge of things eternal and divine.

Among the Christian symbols we have already mentioned are the icons, the sign of the cross, and the vestments of liturgical celebration. In addition, we can mention the use of various colors which have their particular significance, as well as the use of **light**, normally the natural light of candles, which leads us to Christ, the Light of the world and of the Kingdom of God. Generally speaking, light is a universal symbol for the mystical presence of God as the True, the Beautiful and the Good. This is witnessed in almost all religions, philosophies, and artistic expressions.

The Orthodox Church follows the Bible in its use of **incense**. (Exodus 30:8, Psalm 141:2; Luke 1:9; Revelation 8:3) Incense is the symbol of the rising of prayers, of spiritual sacrifice and of the sweet-smelling fragrance of the Kingdom of God.

The Church also uses **bread, wine, wheat, oil, water, flowers, and fruits** as signs of God's love, mercy, goodness, life and the very presence given to man in creation and salvation. Indeed, all elements of creation find the "truth" of their very being and existence as expressions and manifestations of God, as "symbols" of his presence and action in the world for man. This is the reason for their use in this way in the Church.

Among the more graphic Christian symbols in the Church are the **initials and letters of Christ's name**; the **triangle** of the Trinity; the **circle** of eternity; the **fish** which stands for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour; the **eye** of God's omnipresence; the **anchor** of hope; the **rock** of faith; the **flame** of God's consuming presence; the **vine** which Jesus named himself—"I

am the vine, you are the branches.” (John 15:5); the alpha and the omega (Revelation 1:8); the crown and staff of Christ’s kingship; and many others—all of which indicate some aspect of the saving presence and action of God in the world.

The use of symbols is a mode of revelation and communion which passes beyond that of mere verbal or intellectual communication. The death of symbols comes when they are artificially invented, rationally explained or reduced to mere “illustrations” whose meaning is not immediately grasped by man on the level of his living spiritual vision and experience.

