

## WHAT THE WALLS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH TEACH US

The idea of the saints on earth communing with the saints in heaven is greatly emphasized in the Orthodox Church. This communion is expressed very effectively in the iconography of the Eastern churches. Cecil Stewart describes the role of sacred pictures on the walls of our churches as follows:

*The pictures seem to be arranged in a way which instills a feeling of direct relationship between the viewer and the pictures...each personality is represented facing one, so that one stands, as it were, within the congregation of saints. Byzantine art, in fact, puts one in the picture. Thus is achieved a spatial dynamic relationship across the space of the church. The beholder belongs within the artistic envelope, and is linked visually with the heavenly host. He observes and is observed.*

To illustrate this interdependence between the worshipper and the icon a little further, let us look for a moment at the interior of an Orthodox Church. At the highest point of the church, i.e., the top of the dome, there is an icon of Christ Pantocrator—the Ruler and Redeemer of the universe. Immediately below, He is surrounded by angels and archangels who serve Him and execute His commands. The remaining part of the ceiling and walls are decorated with episodes illustrating the redemption of the world, with pictures of saints who not only look at the worshippers but also converse with one another and form their own sacred circle. In the eastern apse, the most significant place after the dome, stands the Virgin Mother, the link between Creator and Creation. The whole story of the Incarnation is depicted on the walls and ceiling of an Orthodox Church. It begins with the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets. Then come the apostles, martyrs, doctors, teachers, saints and finally on the floor level of the congregation, the members of the church militant on earth. Thus around the figure of the all-ruling Christ in the dome is gathered in a circle the communion of saints, the members of the church triumphant in heaven and the church militant on earth, all conversing with each other and all together offering the liturgy to their Lord.

We now proceed with a detailed explanation of the interior of an Orthodox Church where the walls indeed speak to the worshipper.

## **THE INTERIOR OF AN ORTHODOX CHURCH. . .**

...is designed to speak to the worshipper, to establish the mood for worship, to preach the Gospel through architecture and icons, to elevate one's mind to the God one comes to praise and worship.

### **THE NARTHEX. . .**

...or vestibule of the church, represents this world in which man is called to repentance. The nave represents the kingdom of heaven. Passing from the narthex into the nave of the church symbolized the Christian's entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Paul Evdokimov wrote, "Architecturally speaking the temple has a cubic form or that of an elongated rectangle, always turned toward the East whence Christ came, like a ship (nave from *navis*) it floats in the eschatological dimension and sails toward the East, towards Christ."

### **THE ICONS AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE NAVE. . .**

...remind the Orthodox Christian that Christ and the saints are his invisible hosts when he comes to Church. His first act upon entering church is to salute them by making the sign of the cross. Often the worshipper also lights a candle upon entering the sanctuary as a reminder that he is to reflect the light of Christ in the world.

### **ARCHITECTURALLY. . .**

...Orthodox churches vary. Many are built in the form of a cross. Above the middle of the cross is a dome. This represents that in order to receive the many blessings that descend upon us from heaven through the open dome, it is necessary first to accept the cross, or salvation through Jesus Christ.

Eastern Christians set up their church buildings in such a manner that the whole theology of the Orthodox Church can be conveyed within a single church building. Each church becomes a complete expression of

the complete cosmos. Jerusalem is where? Right in the parish church. Where is Mt. Tabor? Right in the parish church. Where is the Garden of Eden? Right in the parish church. The Mount of Olives? Right in the parish church. Thus, to a person going through his own parish church, all these are present realities-not just facts of the past.

### **THE CHURCH EDIFICE. . .**

...is considered to represent the universe. The ceiling represents heaven. The opening in the ceiling (dome) on which is usually painted an icon of Christ Pantocrator, i.e., the all-ruling Christ. This represents Christ looking down through heaven upon the assembled congregation hearing their prayers, reminding them of His all-pervading presence in the universe. The floor of the church represents this world. The altar uplifted from the floor by four or five steps and suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth gives expression to the fact that its purpose is to lift us up to heaven through the teachings of the Gospel and the grace of the Sacraments, both of which emanate from the altar.

### **THERE IS AN HIERARCHICAL PLAN. . .**

...in the way the icons are arranged in the Orthodox Church. The highest point, the dome is reserved for our Lord. Then comes the figure of the Mother of God on the front wall. Next there are the icons of the angels, apostles and saints on the iconostasion. These constitute the Church Triumphant in heaven. The floor level of the church is reserved for us—the members of the Church Militant. Thus around the figure of Christ is gathered His entire Church, both that in heaven and that on earth.

### **THE CHURCH IS A PALACE. . .**

...for the King of Kings. This explains the extensive use of royal colors: gold, blue and white. The fact that the church is the palace of God's presence gives expression to our faith that even now earth is changed into heaven whenever the Eucharist is celebrated and divine grace is imparted.

## **THE VICTORIOUS CHRIST (PANTOCRATOR)**

The victory of Christ is central to our Orthodox Christian faith. It is to dramatize this victory that the figure of Christ is placed at the highest point of the church, i.e., the top of the dome. It gives full expression to the great victory hymn of the early Church, quoted by Paul in his letter to Philippi:

*...He lowered His dignity still more, becoming obedient even unto death to the death of the cross. Therefore God has raised Him up and has given Him that name which is above every name so that all things, at the name of Jesus, must bend the knee—those in high heaven and upon the earth, and under the earth and every tongue must proclaim of Jesus Christ, that He is the Lord in the glory of God the Father.*

## **THE SANCTUARY WALL (APSE)**

A large painting of the Child-Holding Theotokos is usually depicted above the holy table on the sanctuary wall of many Orthodox Churches. The purpose of this icon is to express the incarnation. Out of the infinite heaven the Theotokos is presenting the new-born Child to the multitudes of believers standing below. It is a visual expression of Scripture: "Today a Saviour is born to us; a Child was born to us, and a Son given to us."

## **THE TWO LARGE CANDELABRA. . .**

...before the icon screen, represent the column of light by which God guided the Jews at night to the promised land. When the light appeared the Jewish people followed it until it eventually led them to the promised land. During the day God used a cloud. These two candelabra remind us that we, too, have a promised land, so today He guides us to ours through the teachings of the Gospel and the grace of the sacraments.

## **THE ICONOSTASIS OR ICON SCREEN. . .**

...separates the nave from the altar. It is symbolical of the temple veil in the Old Testament which separated the Holy of Holies from the

remainder of the temple. On the screen are placed icons or religious pictures of Christ, of Mary the Theotokos, and of various other saints. All these invite the faithful to a worshipful meditation of God. The icon screen, screening off the holy of holies from the full view of the worshipper, reminds us of the mystery of God who can never be fully understood by finite man.

### **THE SECOND TIER OF ICONS. . .**

...on the icon screen depicts the major scenes in the life of our Lord from the Annunciation to His Ascension. This serves as a visual Gospel to the worshipper. Not all churches may have this second tier of icons. Some have three or more tiers, reaching almost to the ceiling.

### **THE ROYAL DOORS. . .**

...on the icon screen are called “royal” in view of the fact that Christ the King is carried through them in the Sacrament of Eucharist as the priest carries the precious Body and Blood out to the congregation. They remind us that Christ alone is the door leading to communion with the Holy Trinity.

### **THE ROLE OF ICONOGRAPHY**

The Christian people need to realize that they belong to a pilgrim people enroute to heaven. Here we see the role of iconography in our churches: to represent some of the major phases of salvation history to the worshippers and provide a reminder that the small local parish is in communion with the angels and saints.

### **LIVING ICONS**

During the services of our Church, the priest censes first the icons and then the entire congregation. In so doing, the Church honors not only the angels, saints and martyrs, but also the *living icon* (image) of Christ which every faithful Christian bears.

## **THE HOLY ALTAR**

From the very beginning Christians honored the memory of those who died in the persecutions. The tombs of the early martyrs were held in high veneration. On the anniversary of their deaths the liturgy was celebrated on their graves and a sermon was preached. This was practiced especially during the first 300 years of Christianity when worship was underground, in the catacombs, where the tombs of these early martyrs were easily accessible. From this early Christian custom has come the practice of placing the relics of some martyr or saint in the holy altar of each church upon its consecration.

## **THE TABERNACLE. . .**

...is kept on the center of the holy altar. In the Old Testament the tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments were kept in the tabernacle. In the New Testament it is the Lord Jesus Himself who dwells in the tabernacle. His precious Body and Blood are kept in the tabernacle. The church, then, is truly the house of God. God is ever present there in a very real way. This is why the Eastern Orthodox Christian makes the sign of the cross whenever he or she passes before the holy altar.

## **THE ETERNAL LIGHT...**

...is the votive light that is suspended above the tabernacle. It burns constantly to denote that the Lord Jesus Who is "Light of the World" is present in the tabernacle.

## **THE TWO CIRCULAR STANDARDS ON EITHER SIDE OF THE TABERNACLE. . .**

...which are found in many Orthodox Churches are called in Greek "exapteriga" (six winged). Engraved on these are the six-winged angels which, according to Isaiah's vision of God, surround the throne of God in heaven. They remind us that these same angels surround the throne of God on earth—the holy altar—where God's precious Body and Blood are ever present in the tabernacle. They are carried in sacred processions during the liturgy.

## **THE GOSPEL BOOK. . .**

...is enthroned on the holy altar where Christ is constantly present as the Word of Life in the Gospel book and as the Bread of Life (Eucharist) in the tabernacle.

## **THE FOUR GOSPEL WRITERS. . .**

...Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are usually depicted at the four corners of the base of the dome to express the fact that through their writings the Gospel of Jesus was spread to the four corners of the earth.

## **A CHANDELIER. . .**

...is usually suspended from the dome or ceiling to signify the majesty of the firmament and the glory of God's heavenly bodies, i.e., the sun, the moon and the planets. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1).

## **THE TABLE OF PREPARATION. . .**

...is a small altar to the left of the main altar behind the icon screen. Here the peoples' gifts of bread and wine are prepared before the liturgy and later carried in a solemn procession to the main altar. An icon of the Nativity is usually found on the altar of preparation to signify that it represents the manger of Bethlehem. Just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so through the Eucharist He comes to be born and dwell in our lives today.

## **A SEVEN-BRANCHED CANDELABRA. . .**

...is usually found in Orthodox churches to represent the seven sacraments and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

## **THE BISHOP'S THRONE. . .**

...is usually found to the right of the iconostasis. It is set apart for the bishop or archbishop who is considered to be the head of the local Church and represents Jesus Christ. For this reason, an icon of Christ, the High Priest, is usually painted somewhere on the throne. The bishop occupies the throne during the liturgy and other church ceremonies.

## THE PULPIT. . .

...is usually located to the left of the iconostasis near the center of the nave. Used for the reading of the Gospel and the preaching of the sermon, it symbolizes the stone used to seal the entrance to Christ's tomb from which the angel proclaimed the good tidings of the Resurrection to the women who had come to anoint His body. Often the pulpit is decorated with icons of the Lord and the four Gospel writers.

## HEAVEN ON EARTH

In the film *The Deer Hunter*, a Russian Orthodox parish church stands as a monument of riches and finery in the midst of an otherwise dreary Pennsylvania steel-town. Its gold encrusted "onion" towers and ornate Byzantine chancel are in stark contrast to the grim lives of the people it serves.

Rather than being offended by it, one gets a sense of purpose in the contrast. This parish church represents an alternative in the lives of the people. Rather than just more of the same, a mirror of what they already know and struggle with, it proclaims something else, as an active and saving force. It is erected not only to the glory of God, but as a sign of the presence of His glory. It is an invitation to experience heaven on earth.

The Orthodox church building represents God in the midst of His people, in their joys as well as their sorrows; God calling us to the other alternative, to the "more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31), to the more fulfilling life for which we were created.