

"Sacred Space"

Presentation at the 100 Anniversary of the Protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Rosedale 2014

When we stand in our church building, we are in a sacred space. But what does that mean? All of God's creation is supposed to be in some sense sacred, so what makes this place different? Isn't God everywhere, you might ask?

Even though we know that God is everywhere present and filling all things, if we saw Him, in the flesh, walk through the door right now, our response would show that we would consider that kind of presence by Him different than our regular, everyday awareness of Him, and rightly so.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that, "the Eucharist is 'the source and summit of the Christian life.'" What makes this place different is that every time a bishop or priest serves Divine Liturgy here, under the appearance of bread and wine, Jesus Christ comes through those doors. That sacred reality defines everything we do and say before, during, and after that divine moment. And it also puts its stamp on this architectural space.

Byzantine Church architecture is a microcosm – the church building itself becomes a symbol of our world and teaches us salvation history. Just as the icons you see here are windows into spiritual reality, this church building is an *architectural* icon – an image of the union of heaven and earth. When we come here to worship, we enter into something called sacramental time where, by virtue of God being in all times and in all places and our being united with Him through Christ, we are united with the heavenly hosts in worship of God and in a real sense present at the events of salvation history recounted in the scriptures. We enter here, not just into a building, but into an experience of heaven on earth in order to return to the world for the purposes for which God has sent us.

Every journey begins with a first step and our first step is taken at the outside door of the church building. We enter into a foyer called the Narthex. It represents the world-not-yet-redeemed. This is where every single one of us begins. And that beginning is represented liturgically by that being the place for baptisms and the beginning of chrismations, the rites of Christian initiation. Also, the Litiya is served there - the Narthex becoming symbolic of Golgotha where Christ was crucified.

We cross the threshold into the large room we are now in, called the Sanctuary, the equivalent of the Nave in the Roman Catholic Church, which represents redeemed humanity. We proceed to the tetrapod and venerate the icon, bowing and crossing ourselves three times. Just like any good meeting between persons, this gets us off on the right foot – it is appropriate both to who God is and who we are and is proper to why God has called us here.

And if we look around from that point, we will find that we are standing at the intersection of a cross – a good place to be in the love of the Lord. And if we look up, we find that we are under the dome of the stars, the heavens that declare the glory of God.

But then there is this wall in front of us and we can't just walk into that room in the same way that we walked into this one. Just as in the Jewish Temple there was a holy place into which only the priests and the High Priest could go, this is the holiest place in our church. In the Roman Catholic Church, the table on which the Eucharist is served is called the Altar. In the Ukrainian Catholic Church, the whole area behind the iconostas is called the Altar and the table is called the Holy Table.

This wall is called the Iconostas. The doors on each side are called the Deacon's Doors. The double doors in the center are called the Royal Doors. The Royal Doors, the Holy Table, and the space between them is our Holy of Holies. Only ordained clergy may enter through the Royal Doors, walk in front of, and touch the Holy Table.

So, why is this space restricted in this way? Why can't I just walk in there too? Why is it for them and not for me too, you might ask?

That space does exist for all of us, not just the ordained clergy. But the reason anyone else can't just go in there is due to the kind of space that it is. The Altar represents Eternity, from which God, His Word, His Spirit, and divine acts precede and to which they return. The Holy Table and the space before it is the place where God Incarnate will become present before us in the bread and wine. We treat this space as especially sacred out of reverence for His holiness, being mindful of our sinfulness. The sacredness that space represents is protected by having only consecrated persons being able to go there on our behalf. If I could just walk in there myself, that space would cease to be what it is. Instead of gaining something by going there myself, I would lose what it represents and means to me.

So, to preserve that sacred space and its liturgical meaning for all of us, we also have the Deacon's Doors by which to enter, walk around the Holy Table instead of in front of it, and exit the Altar.

This interplay between these different levels of sacred space is used meaningfully during Divine Liturgy in order to, like an icon, make spiritual realities visible and allow us to physically participate in them.

Divine Liturgy is divided into two parts, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Gospel According to John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus Christ is the living Word of God. During the Liturgy of the Word, the priest comes out through the (north) Deacon's Door holding the Gospel Book. The faithful come forward and venerate it. The priest then solemnly enters through the Royal Doors, holding the Gospel Book high, as we sing:

"Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ. Son of God, risen from the dead, save us who sing to you: Alleluia."

Notice that the Word of God, both written and living, comes from both sides of the iconostas, from the created world and from eternity. The scriptures are both human and divine; Jesus Christ is both divine and human.

And notice that the Word of God returns to Him. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "the word that goes forth from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

This entrance represents Christ's coming into the world in His incarnation and His offering of Himself to the Father in baptism.

Again, during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest comes out through the (north) Deacon's Door with the gifts of bread and wine, prays for the whole church and all her members worldwide and then solemnly enters again through the Royal Doors, holding the gifts high, as we sing:

“That we may receive the King of all, escorted invisibly by ranks of angels, Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

This represents Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to sacrifice Himself for our sins.

At the Holy Table, the priest then prays the prayer of consecration of the gifts. But he does not do that on his own authority simply by virtue of being a priest.

At the beginning of the second century, about 110AD, St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the Apostle John and the third Bishop of Antioch wrote,

“See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the priests as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid.”

So, you can see the great significance of the sending of Blessed Nikita Budka as the first Ukrainian Catholic bishop to Canada over 100 years ago.

For that reason, on the Holy Table is a rectangular piece of cloth with a small relic of a martyr sewn into it, called the Antimins. The Eucharist cannot be celebrated without it. The Antimins must be consecrated and signed by the bishop and is placed in the center of the Holy Table and is unfolded only during the Divine Liturgy. Together with chrism, the holy oil, it is the means by which a bishop indicates his permission for priests under his authority to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and Holy Mysteries in his absence.

The "High Place" is a special seat in the Apse of the Altar. It represents God the Father. Only the Bishop sits in the High Place. Priests never sit there. Whenever one moves from one side of the Altar to the other, a reverence is made toward the High Place.

There is much more we could say about all of this. This is only a brief introduction to the features and meaning of this beautiful church built with faith and perseverance by our forefathers.

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Protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Rosedale, MB