

A Tour of a Catholic Church

Non-Catholics who visit our Church ask about some of the objects they see around the Church ... as we grew up with these things around us, most of us never really questioned why or where they came from .. and are not always able to give them good answers!

The church building is a home for the Church, the people, the parish family. We expect differences in our church buildings just as we don't expect any two of our friends to arrange their homes in exactly the same way: Some are modern, others are more traditional.

Therefore, we must all be very careful in our tour of a Catholic church, for the church building is an expression of the personality and values — as well as a reflection of the Catholic faith — of the parish family which worships there. To criticize their church building is to criticize — not their good taste — but their living faith.

Entering the church

Upon first entering a Catholic church, there is a lobby section or foyer. This is called a vestibule or narthex. In older churches, there is an ambiance of the sacred to help elevate the mind before entering the church proper. One of the first things we see in the vestibule is a pool of water. Baptism is our "door" to the Church. It is the way we enter Christ's family. The **holy water font** reminds Catholics that every time they come to Eucharist they come through baptism. They dip their hand in the water and mark themselves anew with that sign in which they were baptized — the sign of the cross.

The Assembly area

Entering the church proper, the **nave** (from the Latin word for "boat"), we find ourselves in a large room. The nave of the church "needs an assembly of people to complete it". It looks especially "right" when it is actually functioning as an assembly space for God's people at prayer.

The nave is usually filled with benches, or **pews**. Catholics expect to find pews in a church and are surprised when they enter one of the older churches of Europe and find no pews or fixed seating! The absence of pews in older churches is a reminder to us that the principal posture for Christian worship is standing. We stand in the presence of one we wish to honor and to serve—just as the priest stands at the altar during Mass. Standing is a mark of reverence and readiness. Pews and fixed seating entered the church at about the same time western culture discovered the printing press; people in church began to "line up" like lines on a printed page to hear the word of God read to them from a printed book. At the time of the Reformation, pews enabled the congregation to sit and listen to the sermon, which often lasted several hours.

— Fixed pews reinforced the image of the congregation as "listeners," like the audience in an auditorium (*audire*, Latin, "to listen"). Recent liturgical renewal suggests that we are present as "doers," actively engaged in the liturgical action, and not merely "listeners." Some churches today do not have fixed pews but use individual **chairs**. A more flexible seating arrangement can encourage a more active and participatory liturgy. Church architects are "striving for —a seating pattern and furniture that do not constrict people but encourage them to move about when it is appropriate".

— Around the walls of many churches you will find the **Way of the Cross**, pictures (numbered from 1 to 14) of incidents in the last journey of Jesus from Pilate's house, where he was condemned to death, to his entombment. From an early date pilgrims to the Holy Land would visit these places (or stations) and follow in the footsteps of Jesus on his way to Calvary. As Christianity spread to the ends of the earth, it was impossible for all the faithful to visit the Holy Land. So in the later Middle Ages the devotional Way of the Cross was made popular, especially by the Franciscans, to enable those who could not afford the rigors and expense of a long pilgrimage to the Holy Land to participate in the passion of Jesus in their own villages. The faithful go to each of the **stations** and meditate on an event of the passion. Our liturgical renewal reminds us that the church is primarily a place for our public worship. Objects for our personal devotion must not distract us from the principal function of the church.

East Wall

The wall behind the altar, as viewed from the nave, is the "east wall," no matter what direction you are actually facing. In the past, all church buildings faced east (or Jerusalem), an ancient practice, inherited from Judaism of facing Jerusalem during prayers. A person who enters the church goes from west to east, which symbolizes going from the evil of the present world to the glory of the New Jerusalem to come.

The Baptismal area / Confessional

Standing by the baptismal font is a large candle, the **paschal candle**. At the Paschal Vigil on the eve of Easter Sunday this candle impregnated the waters of the baptismal pool as **the Church prayed that the Holy Spirit unseal this font to become the womb of new life for the Church**. As the candle is placed in the water we pray: "May all who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism rise also with him to newness of life" (Prayers for the Easter Vigil). This prayer takes on special meaning at funerals when this water is sprinkled on the casket as it arrives at the church door.

Also in this baptismal area of the **narthex** or vestibule of the church, you may see a niche in the wall or a little chest, the **ambry**, which contains three vessels of oil: the **oil of catechumens** which is used to bless and strengthen those preparing for baptism; the **oil of the sick** with which the priest brings Jesus' strength and healing to those who are joined with the suffering Christ in serious illness; and the **sacred chrism** which is used in celebrating the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. The word "Christ" means "anointed," and when one is anointed with holy oil it is a sign of a special relationship with Christ, the Anointed One.

It is common to see one or more **confessionals**, small "rooms" built out from the side or — back wall of the church containing a place for the priest confessor to sit, separated by a screen or grill from the place for the penitent to kneel and confess his or her sins. Confessionals appeared in Catholic churches during the 16th century and were common until just recently.

In more recently constructed churches, you will observe in this baptismal area the door leading to the **reconciliation chapel**, a small room designed for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession). **The reconciliation chapel is located in the baptismal area because of the historical relation between these two sacraments: The Sacrament of Penance developed from the need to reconcile Christians who were not faithful to their baptismal promises and who had separated themselves from the community by their sins.**

The current ritual for the individual celebration of the sacrament offers the penitent a choice between speaking face-to-face with the priest or the anonymity provided by the confessional screen. This option has necessitated the remodeling of confessionals in some churches and the construction of a reconciliation chapel in others.

Choir area

Unlike pre-Vatican II Churches where the choir was always at the back of the Church or in a loft above the back of the Church, in modern churches, where emphasis is put on participation in liturgical singing and responses, the choir is usually situated at the front, beside the sanctuary, or on the side, so that the congregation can see them and even watch them play their instruments many of which were once forbidden in churches.

Focus of the sacred action

From wherever we stand in the church, our attention is drawn to the focal area of the liturgical action and to the three pieces of furniture we find there: the presider's chair, the lectern and the altar. Formerly this area was called the **sanctuary** (Latin *sanctus*, "holy"), but when "sanctuary is used we must be careful not to imply that this is the only holy area in the building, for indeed the entire church, the entire assembly area or nave, is a holy place.

— In the front of the assembly area we find a very special seat for the one presiding and leading the assembly. In the principal church of a diocese, this chair, the **cathedra** (from the Greek word "chair"),

gives name to the entire building, Cathedral. Each church will have a **presider's chair** or bench and seating for the other ministers. This seating is arranged so that the presiding and functioning ministers are "clearly part of the assembly, yet conveniently situated for the exercise of their respective offices".

Also in this focus area as viewed by a worshiper seated among the congregation, there are two speaker's stands on either side of the front of the church. The one on the left is called the pulpit, and it is used by clergy to read the gospel lesson and to preach the sermon. Accordingly, the left side of the church is called the gospel side. The one on the right is called the lectern. It generally holds a large Bible and is used by lay readers for the Old Testament and epistle lessons. Accordingly, the right side of the church is called the epistle side.

The Altar

The **altar** is the holy table upon which we celebrate the Lord's Supper. It functions as both altar of sacrifice and banquet table for the Eucharist, and is both "a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection" and "a paschal banquet—in which Christ is eaten, the heart is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory given to us" (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 47, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas). No ordinary table would be able to bear the weight of these symbolic functions; that is why this table "should be the most noble, the most beautifully designed and constructed table the community can provide".

We will also find in this area a **cross** or **crucifix**. This may be a processional cross with a floor stand or a cross hanging from the ceiling or on the wall. In the cross we see the basic symbol of any Christian liturgical celebration. For in the Paschal Mystery of Christ we find our own image as a Christian community.

Tabernacle

The tabernacle (*tabernaculum*, Latin for "tent"), the "little house" in which the Blessed Sacrament is kept. A lamp, often a red votive candle or **sanctuary lamp** burning before the tabernacle, has traditionally served Catholics as the sign that the consecrated bread or the Real Presence of Christ is present there. Other **candles** will be found in both devotional areas and the assembly area of the church. Sometimes Catholics will light a **votive candle** in front of a statue or shrine as a reminder that their prayers continue even after they leave the church.

A Sacristy

A sacristy contains all the implements, books and vestments for liturgical ceremonies, a sort of antechamber where priests prepare for Mass. You may find a tabernacle and an altar in the sacristy against one wall, usually the one that is opposite to the church sanctuary. There are shallow drawers and cabinets for vestments and holy vessels. Supplies such as hosts, candles, incense, etc., are all stored in the sacristy as well.

There is a sink called a sacrarium which is used to wash the priests hands and disposing any blessed water; the pipe to this sink goes directly into the earth as is prescribed for the disposing of holy things. Holy oils and other sacred vessels are stored in the sacristy either in the tabernacle there or in a separate vault.

Statues, art and living saints

The statues and paintings of the saints aided the devotion of the faithful at a time when active participation in the liturgical action was reserved to the clergy. The statues placed us in union with heroic Christians of other times and places. The saints were intercessors for particular favors and blessings. Statues and beautiful objects of art, banners and flowers will always be an important part of the environment for our worship.

A staple of Catholic architecture, windows are specifically designed to accommodate large panes of stained glass that usually depict a saint or holy event. The glass was meant to show forth the saints

through light, a metaphor for Christ illuminating them and their virtues and example and thus the effect was to raise the mind to God.

One of the historical functions of stained glass windows, in addition to bathing the assembly area with their beautiful light, was to illustrate the stories of the Bible for those who could not read or afford expensive manuscripts. (The 13th-century windows of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris contains 1,134 illustrations from the Bible!) But such objects do not merely teach; they are not history lessons. Their artistic beauty reveals to us something of the beauty of God and God's dreams for us.

Our liturgical renewal has helped us become more aware that the principal function of the church is our common worship. In our day the principal "decoration" and "treasured possession" of the church is the worshiping community. Faces of the saints have always aided our worship, and we~ continue to revere our sisters and brothers in Christ of other ages.

Today, nonetheless, we are designing our assembly space to enable us to see more clearly the other members of the congregation. We want to be encouraged by the faces of the living saints as well—the heroes and heroines who carry the message of the Eucharist out into our world and our time.

Overall Shape and Organization

Large churches, such as cathedrals, used to be constructed in the shape of a cross, so that if you were to look down at them they would actually look like a cross. The length of the church - where the main aisle run down - is called the nave. The crossbar that intersected the nave was called the transept. The point where the nave and transept intersected was called the crossing and usually here was found the sanctuary. In larger churches, like cathedrals, there used to be a dome, such as St. Peter's in Rome, and the outer area in the church around this dome was called the ambulatory and was ringed with side altars. In centuries past, Churches used to always have depictions of the faith on their walls, either in running paintings or carvings, so that even the most simple soul could absorb the catechism just by looking around the building.

One is that the modern Church is not concerned with appearances, since the emphasis is on the people, not on the exteriors hence distraction and any form of barrier or separation is avoided. Secondly, modern churches are designed with an eye on being current, trying to reach the world by adapting to modern fringe design and the tastes of the times.

As our tour ends

But more than any external signs and symbols, we must remember that the principal beauty of the Catholic church is the hospitality of its assembly, the eagerness with which they hear the Word of God, the devotion with which they share the holy Eucharist and the love which they take forth to transform the earth.

Vestments — ritual clothing

Vestments, the special ritual clothing worn by those who lead the assembly in prayer are "an appropriate symbol of their service" and add their own element of beauty to the celebration. The priest wears a long white garment, an **alb** (from *albus*, Latin for "white"). Over this is worn a **chasuble** (from the Latin for "little house").

Today these garments look quite different from our ordinary street clothing. Originally this was not the case. The alb and chasuble find their origins in the ordinary garments worn in the later Greco-Roman world. Around the house both men and women wore an alb, a long loose-fitting garment. When going out in public they put on a more ornate garment, a chasuble, over the alb. If you attended Mass in fourth-century Rome, the leader of the liturgical assembly would be dressed in much the same way as the priest today vests for Sunday Mass. But at that time, everyone in the church would be wearing an alb and chasuble!