

INTERPRETING CHURCHES



How the belief of a worshipping community is reflected throughout a church building

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WHAT IS A CHURCH?

Although it is possible to recognise a number of external features that tell us from the outside that a building is a church (steeple, tower, stained glass windows etc), none of these things are actually necessary for a church. A church is simply a place for a Christian community to meet and worship God, and the form it takes can vary tremendously.

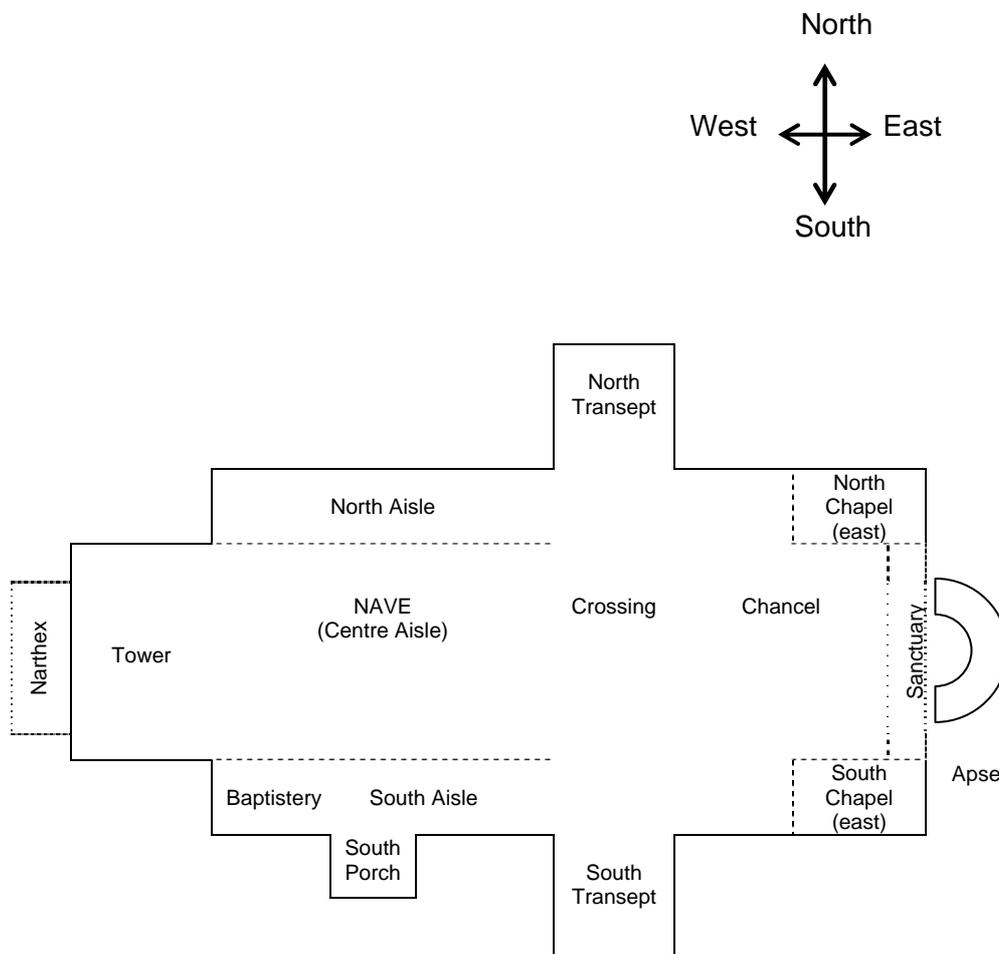
The earliest Christians did not use existing Roman temples as churches, but instead they used a form of building that was used for markets and law courts – the **BASILICA**. There were two reasons for this. First they did not want to use a building that was associated with non-Christian worship. Second, and more importantly, they needed a space that was big enough to meet as a community in order to worship.

Over the centuries church buildings evolved, incorporating many special features, the role of which was to support people's understanding of the Christian faith and the worship that was taking place. It was intended that the church was a building to be interpreted, or 'read' and understood by those who came to worship. Throughout the Christian world (Christendom) a uniformity of design and decoration of these special features was introduced.

Throughout the Reformation in England destruction and desecration of much of the traditional Catholic imagery in churches took place on a large scale. Traditional Catholic churches were adapted to reflect changes in belief and the new Anglican forms of worship. Today it is still possible to see evidence of this change and adaptation in many mediaeval churches.

This guide considers the traditional elements found in a Christian church in both the Anglican (Church of England) and the Roman Catholic traditions. It aims to help the reader understand how the belief of the worshipping community is reflected in the material things found in a church, from the design and layout, the fixtures and fittings to the wealth of symbolic representation of every aspect of Christian belief.

THE MAIN PARTS OF A CHURCH



Christian churches are most often built in a cruciform shape (cross-shaped), with the altar at the eastern end. Traditional churches consist of a large rectangular space in which to seat a large number of people. This is called the **NAVE**.

The main focal point of the building is the **APSE** - this is where the judge would have sat in a Roman **BASILICA** and where we usually find the priests, the High Altar and the Tabernacle.

The **TRANSEPT** separates the **NAVE** from the **CHANCEL** and **APSE** and symbolises a similar sort of transition as the **NARTHEX**, only here it separates the clergy from the congregation.

Symbolic meaning is attached to all parts of a church. In a Catholic church the roof symbolises *charity*; the floor symbolises the *foundation of faith* and the *humility of the poor*; the columns represent the *Apostles, Bishops, and Doctors*; the vaulting represents the *preachers* who bear up the dead weight of man's infirmity heavenwards; and the beams represent the champions of ecclesiastical right who defend it with the sword. The Nave symbolises *Noah's Ark* and the *Barque of St. Peter*. The direction of the East represents the Heavenly Jerusalem, and the direction whence the Messiah will return in glory; West represents death. (*Catholic Encyclopaedia*)

(If you think of the church as a human form the narthex is the feet, the nave is the body, the transepts are the arms and the apse is the head – the most important part!)

THE DIRECTION OF A CHURCH

Traditionally all Christian churches were built from East to West. For Christians, of all the points of the compass, the most sacred is East, pointing in the direction of the holy city of Jerusalem.

Sion, the Celestial City or Heavenly Jerusalem, were all phrases used by mediaeval writers to connect churches in Western Christendom with the Temple in Jerusalem, a site revered by Jews and Christians alike as the one place on earth where God's presence was strongest.

The high altar is always placed at the East end of the church, side altars are also placed on East walls and the congregation faces East to pray.

As well as being oriented towards Jerusalem, Christian churches were traditionally built from East to West because the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. The sun rising in the East was associated with dawn on Easter Day, when Christ rose from the dead.



Burials beneath the paving were placed with their feet to the East, with the intention that on the Last Day, when they rose from their resting place, they would stand up and face their Creator and Judge. Christian burials still have this orientation today.

The East and West windows in a church are the most important; the East because they let in the morning sun, which symbolises God as the Light of the World, and the West because the dying sun reminds us of the Day of Judgement. The North side of the church is dark and traditionally represented the devil, and the South side is sunny, representing the Holy Spirit. Burial grounds and graveyards were traditionally on the South side of the church.

THE NARTHEX OR PORCH

In the first churches the **NARTHEX** was a separate area within a church for those people who had not yet become full members. From the **NARTHEX** they could watch and listen without being able to fully take part in the Mass. They were *preparing* to enter the church as Christians. Over time, the role of the **NARTHEX** has changed a bit, but it remains a place of transition, a place for people as they pass from the outside world into a spiritual place.

A true **NARTHEX** is either an outside, covered porch-like structure or an inside area separated from the nave (the "body" of the church) by a screen, but over time this word has also come to mean "entry" or "foyer." It is always at the West end of the church.

The **NARTHEX** is a place of setting aside. We live in a busy world, and when we come into the *Domus Dei* (the House of God) we leave behind us the business (and the busy-ness) of the world. Just as when we go home we

kick off our shoes, put aside our daily work and worries and prepare for our quieter time, so when we approach the church building, we enter through this place of adjustment.

We are ready to enter a different place, a new space, a consecrated place set aside for the worship of God. A church is a place for reflection, a place of stillness and the place for gathering of the whole community. It is a spiritual house. It is by passing through the **NARTHEX** that we move from *secular* into *sacred space*.

THE BAPTISTRY

The **BAPTISTRY**, like the **NARTHEX**, is a separate, transitional space with both being used by those who are not yet members of the church.

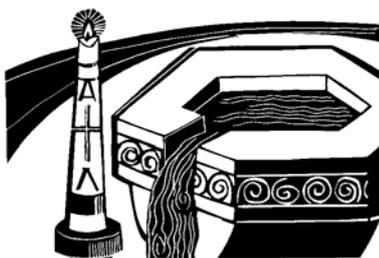
Baptism in the early church usually involved full immersion so that churches had a little pool for baptism; indeed some Christian churches still use pools.

Several hundred years after Christ died some of the bigger churches started building separate spaces for baptism.

The earliest of these were round so most later **BAPTISTRIES** were either round or octagonal. When the original pools were replaced with **FONTS**, this traditional shape was kept. In most churches there is no separate **BAPTISTRY**, but just a font that is often located near the **NARTHEX**. It is at the West end of the church to symbolise the beginning of the Christian journey.



THE FONT



The word **FONT** comes from the Latin word *fons* meaning 'fountain' or source of living water. The **FONT** has holy water in it, water which has been blessed by a priest.

The Christian life begins with Baptism, and the holy water which is used symbolises cleansing from sin and rebirth to a new life in Christ – it is the beginning of a Christian's journey or pilgrimage through life.

In just the same way that we wash every day to get ourselves clean and ready for a new day, at Baptism a person 'washes away' their old life and promises to start a fresh, new life as a Christian.

The priest uses a shell to pour the Holy Water onto the head of the person being baptised. The shell is a Christian symbol of pilgrimage.

In all Roman Catholic churches, and some Anglican churches, there are Holy Water stoops inside the church near the doors. As worshippers enter the church they dip their hands into the Holy water and make the sign of the cross, a continual reminder of their baptism.

THE PASCHAL CANDLE



Another word for **PASCHAL CANDLE** is **EASTER CANDLE**. For the 50 days of Easter (from the Easter Vigil until the feast of Pentecost) this candle stands within the **SANCTUARY**. For the rest of the year it finds its home by the **FONT** in the **BAPTISTRY**. The **PASCHAL CANDLE** is a very large candle placed in a stand.

It is one of the key elements of the Easter Vigil, one of the most important liturgical celebrations of the year, on Holy Saturday Night. In the Roman Catholic Church this is a long service and it uses the drama of darkness and light to symbolise death and life. The service starts in complete darkness and the **PASCHAL CANDLE** is brought into the church.

From this candle smaller ones are lit, each held by a member of the congregation, and soon the church is alive with candlelight representing Christ, the Light of the World shining through.

On the **PASCHAL CANDLE** you will see other symbols:

- Alpha and Omega – the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They symbolise God who is the beginning and the end of creation;
- The numbers of the current year e.g. 2010 signifying that Jesus is the Lord of all time;
- Five grains of incense. Encased in brass studs these are arranged in the shape of a cross on the candle and represent the wounds on the body of Jesus after His crucifixion.

This candle is also lit for Baptisms and Funerals. *Christ is the beginning and the end: The alpha and the omega.*

THE NAVE

The **NAVE** is the western end of a church and is the place where the people or 'congregation' sit.

Referring to the "Barque of St Peter" and "Noah's Ark," the word comes from the Latin **NAVIS**, meaning 'a ship', and symbolises the passage of the Christian through the stormy waters of life. This image was inspired by the story of Noah saving humans and animals from the flood.

The Nave is like an upside down boat and if you look up in the Nave of many churches you will see that the main central rib becomes the keel of a boat, the ribs form the bottom, the pillars the sides and the floor becomes the deck.



Pews are a very late addition to the **NAVE** area, and, even today, parishioners stand during the liturgy in many Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Churches had a stone bench set into the side walls so that old and infirm people could sit down. This is where the saying *'the weakest go to the wall'* comes from.

Pews were introduced into churches after the Reformation when the preaching of very long sermons became a major part of the services and people needed to be able to sit down. In Gothic architecture, the **NAVE** had an aisle (or two) on both sides.

THE CROSSING

This is the place where the **NAVE**, **CHANCEL** and **TRANSEPTS** intersect. This area is often domed or has a central tower above.

THE TRANSEPTS

The transverse arm of a cruciform church is called the **TRANSEPT**. Because the liturgy is supposed to be celebrated *ad orientem* (facing East), the left side of the **TRANSEPT** is called the North transept and the right side of the **TRANSEPT** is called the South transept. Some churches have **TRANSEPTS** at the West end of the church, too - especially English Gothic churches.

THE SANCTUARY AND QUIRE (CHANCEL)

The **SANCTUARY** is the most holy part of a church. Its name comes from the Latin word *sanctus* meaning 'holy'. It is at the east end of a church.

The word **CHANCEL** comes from the word *cancelli*, meaning "lattice work," which was once used to rail off the **QUIRE** from the **NAVE**. The **CHANCEL** is where the priests would sit on long benches to sing the responses at Mass and chant the Divine Office.

Medieval churches often had "rood screens" ("rood" means "cross") separating the **SANCTUARY** and choir from the body of the **NAVE**. The rood screen had the rood -- the Crucifix -- often flanked by images of the Virgin Mary and St. John and by oil lamps. This screen totally separated the **SANCTUARY** from the place where the people sat so that the sanctuary was truly treated as the Holy of Holies. At the Reformation, stone Rood Screens were damaged and wooden ones were usually ripped out completely, although some rare examples remain like the one in Manchester Cathedral.

The rise of Renaissance architecture saw the disappearance of the **QUIRE** area, the bringing forward of the sanctuary, and the general disappearance of the rood screens. The **SANCTUARY** was, instead, separated from the **NAVE** by altar rails at which the communicants knelt to receive the Holy Communion.

As well as being the place where the **ALTAR** is sited, the **SANCTUARY** is the place where the **TABERNACLE**, which holds the Blessed Sacrament, is kept and over which there should always be burning a tabernacle light or **SANCTUARY LAMP**. The other place where the Tabernacle might be kept is a separate, conspicuous, well-adorned side chapel in churches in which the Altar area is used for the celebration of Holy Communion.

In a Roman Catholic church the **TABERNACLE** looks like a church – it is metal and very bright. It is where the consecrated bread (The Body of Christ) is placed after the Mass so that Jesus is always present in the church. The body of Christ kept in the **TABERNACLE** is called the **BLESSED SACRAMENT**, and the red **SANCTUARY LAMP** signifies its presence. Another sign of Jesus' presence is the **VEIL** over the **TABERNACLE**.

In many Anglican churches there is no reserved sacrament. In other Anglican churches one of three forms of reservation is used:

1. In a **TABERNACLE** as in a Roman Catholic church;
2. In an **AUMBREY**, which looks like a safe fixed into the wall;
3. Inside a **HANGING PYX** (a metal container hanging from a chain)

Within the **SANCTUARY** is the **ALTAR**.

THE ALTAR

Very early man used to worship many different gods. An **ALTAR** was a special place made of stone where people made sacrifices to their gods. A sacrifice was something valuable such as an animal or even a human being that was given up or offered to a god.

The animal or person had to be killed so that the god could receive their offering. People did this because they thought that by giving their god something so valuable it would please him or her and the people would then be given what they wanted. People might want rain for a good harvest or victory over an enemy that they were fighting.

Today, in most Anglican churches, the **ALTAR** has become a symbol, a reminder of the table at which Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples to celebrate the Jewish Feast of the Passover.

During this meal he told his disciples that the bread was His body and the wine His blood. He said that people should share bread and wine forever after so that they would remember Him.

In most Anglican churches an **ALTAR** is generally made from wood and is often referred to as the **COMMUNION TABLE**.

In Roman Catholic churches the **ALTAR** is still the place of sacrifice. Christ sacrificed Himself for us on the cross, and the re-enactment of this sacrifice happens every time that Mass is celebrated. Just like early **ALTARS**, the **ALTAR** in Roman Catholic churches is always made from stone.



The early Christians in Rome first gathered underground as it was not legal to be a Christian until 315 AD. After this time they became public in the expression of their faith. They would try to build a church near to the place of a tomb of one of the early Christian saints who died for their faith. We call these saints Martyrs (from the Greek word meaning *to give witness*). As the numbers of Christians spread to places where there had been no martyrs, the communities sought a relic, or a part of the body of a martyr. They would take a relic of a saint and place it into a **SEPULCHRE** (tomb) inside the **ALTAR** which is sometimes known as a **RELIQUARY**.

Many Anglican churches have a wooden **ALTAR** with a *consecration stone* placed in a recess in the top. This has five crosses carved into it which represent the five wounds of Christ.

The main **ALTAR** (or High Altar) is always at the East end of a church. Traditionally the priest also faced East. In this way the worshippers faced the rising sun – the symbol of the presence of Christ, the Light of the World. They also faced the Holy City of Jerusalem. Often three steps lead up to the **ALTAR**, symbolising *faith, hope and love*.

In older churches, you might still see elaborate altar screens or "Altar pieces" behind the Altar. The more fanciful, ornate ones are called "**reredos**" and can be quite exquisite, filled with sculptures or highly decorated.

Until the Reformation the **ALTAR** stood against the wall, with the priest standing with his back to the congregation when he said Mass. After the Reformation this changed and the priest celebrated the Eucharist facing the congregation from behind a free-standing altar. This change did not happen in Roman Catholic churches until the 1970s.

THE LECTERN

The **LECTERN** is a reading stand on the right side of the church as you face the Altar (the "Epistle side") from where the Epistles (or Letters) are read. Not all churches have both a **LECTERN** and a **PULPIT**; some just have one single speaker's podium called an **AMBO**. Note that the Epistle side of the church is also informally referred to as the "St. Joseph side" of the church because it is there that, in a Roman Catholic church, a statue of him is often placed.

In many Anglican churches the **LECTERN** is in the form of an eagle with wings outstretched.



The Eagle is a symbol of St John the Evangelist who wrote one of the Gospels. Eagles are big, strong birds with a huge wing-span and can soar higher than most other birds. It was believed that an Eagle would carry God's word not only through the whole building but also out into the world beyond. The Eagle would always be standing on a sphere, which represented the world.

THE PULPIT

The **PULPIT** is on the left side of the church as you face the Altar (the "Gospel side"), from where the Gospel is read. The left side is the North side which was traditionally associated with darkness and the Devil so the Gospel, or the Word of God was addressed to the Devil.

After the Reformation the preaching of the Word of God became the most important part of the service. Because of this **PULPITS** became much larger. In some churches a high triple-decker **PULPIT** was put in, with the minister standing at the very top where he could be both seen and heard. These were often located in the centre of the church so that most of the congregation had their back to the altar, signifying the predominance of the word over the sacraments.

THE CROSS

The **CROSS** is the symbol of Christianity. This reminds us of the cross on which Jesus gave up his own life in order to pay for the sins of the world. The empty cross also symbolises the risen Christ. It represents an instrument of torture that has been defeated – from which the victim has walked away. It is therefore an image of God's power and of hope. A plain cross is more likely to be found in an Anglican church.

THE CRUCIFIX



The word **CRUCIFIX** comes from the Latin meaning fixed to the cross. The figure of Jesus is attached to the cross.

The letters INRI are often at the top of the crucifix. The letters INRI stand for 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' from the Latin IESUS NAZARENUS REX IUDAEORUM.

The **CRUCIFIX** symbolises the sufferings of Jesus, and the sufferings that people experience in life can be associated with the sufferings Christ endured for us. Through His sufferings came new life and through our suffering with Jesus we meet hope. The **CRUCIFIX** is more likely to be found in a Roman Catholic church.

CANDLES

There are many candles to be seen in a church. In the Christian faith light has a very important place. Light is a symbol of hope and goodness and symbolises the presence of Jesus in the world. Candles symbolise Christ as the Light of the World – He is a light shining in the darkness. As they burn themselves out, candles remind people of Jesus' self-giving both in His life and on the cross. As the candles burn out, giving up their light people are reminded of the unselfishness of Jesus Christ which in turn teaches them to be more generous to one another.

As well as being placed on the Altar, candles are also used at different times of the year such as Advent, Easter and Baptisms (see Paschal Candle).

Within all Catholic churches and many Anglican churches there is a special stand (a pricket stand) where people come to light a candle. These are often found next to a statue. These candles are called **VOTIVE CANDLES**. Votive means offering, and these little candles represent the prayers of the people who light them. In this way:

LIGHTING A CANDLE IS A PRAYER:

When we have gone, it stays alight, kindling in the hearts and minds of others the prayers we have already offered for them, for the sad, the sick, the suffering - and prayers of thankfulness too.

LIGHTING A CANDLE IS A PARABLE:

Burning itself out, it gives light to others. Christ gave himself for others. He calls us to give ourselves.

LIGHTING A CANDLE IS A SYMBOL:

Of love and hope, of light and warmth. Our world needs them all.



THE SACRISTY

The **SACRISTY** is the 'office' of the church and like the **NARTHEX** it is a kind of transitional space. It is here that the priests don their vestments and remove them after Mass.

The **SACRISTY** is where sacred vestments, liturgical vessels, unconsecrated bread and wine etc., are stored. When the sacristy is behind the chancel and has two entrances, the priests enter on the Gospel side and exit through the Epistle side.

In the **SACRISTY** you will find the sacrarium -- a special sink with a pipe that bypasses the sewer, unlike an ordinary sink, and instead goes straight into the earth. This is to preserve the dignity of sacred things which can no longer be used. For example the sacred vessels are rinsed there so that no particle of the consecrated bread (Host) or no drop of the consecrated wine (Precious Blood) will end up in the sewer. The first rinse that is used to clean Altar linens, old baptismal water, sacred oils, blessed ashes, etc., is at the sacrarium, returning those substances to the earth.

