

A photograph of St. Nicholas of Southampton church, a modern brick building with a tall, narrow tower on the left. The tower has a small, narrow window near the top. The main entrance features a large, arched window with multiple panes and a white cross above it. To the right, there is a two-story brick building with white window frames. A black car is parked in the foreground on the left. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

Welcome to St. Nicholas of Southampton

A guide to the Orthodox Church



Architecture & symbolism

As you approach an Orthodox Church, you will notice that it is quite different from Western church buildings. The exterior of an Orthodox Church building will usually have one or more domes, often topped by a cupola. Unlike the pointed steeples of Western churches, which point to God far away in the Heavens, the dome is an all-embracing ceiling, revealing 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**).

Over the entrance of the building, or at times next to it, there is usually a bell tower. Different patterns of ringing the bells are used to call the faithful to prayer and to the divine services. They also used at important points during services. The sound of bells

reminds us of the higher, Heavenly world. Orthodox churches generally take one of several exterior shapes that have spiritual significance. The most common shape is a rectangular shape, in the form of a ship. Just as a ship conveys people through the stormy seas to a calm harbor, so the Church, guided by Christ, carries us to the Kingdom of God. Churches are also frequently built in the form of a Cross — to proclaim that we are saved through faith in the Crucified Christ.

Almost always Orthodox churches are oriented East-West, with the main entrance of the building at the West end. This symbolizes the entrance of the faithful from the darkness of sin (the West) into the light of truth (the East).

The interior of the Orthodox Church building is designed to convey the unity of the universe in God. It is not simply a meeting hall for people whose life exists solely within the bounds of this earth. The Church building is patterned after the image of God's Kingdom, as revealed in Holy Scripture:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!' And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.'

(Isaiah 6:1-7)

This vision of the Holy Prophet Isaiah is a vision into the Heavenly throne room of God. In this vision is revealed the eternal worship and adoration of God which takes place "at all times and in every hour." The Orthodox Church also lives this divine revelation. St. John the Theologian also heard the same loud voice and witnessed the eternal worship that takes place in the presence of the Holy God:

And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back ... each having six wings,... And they do not rest day or night, saying: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!' **(Revelations 4:5-8)**

The Divine worship, prayers, services and Mysteries which are celebrated in the Holy Orthodox Church lead us into this mystic, divine and continuous Heavenly adoration of the All-holy Trinity. In a most perfect way, the Church teaches us to fulfill St. Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing."

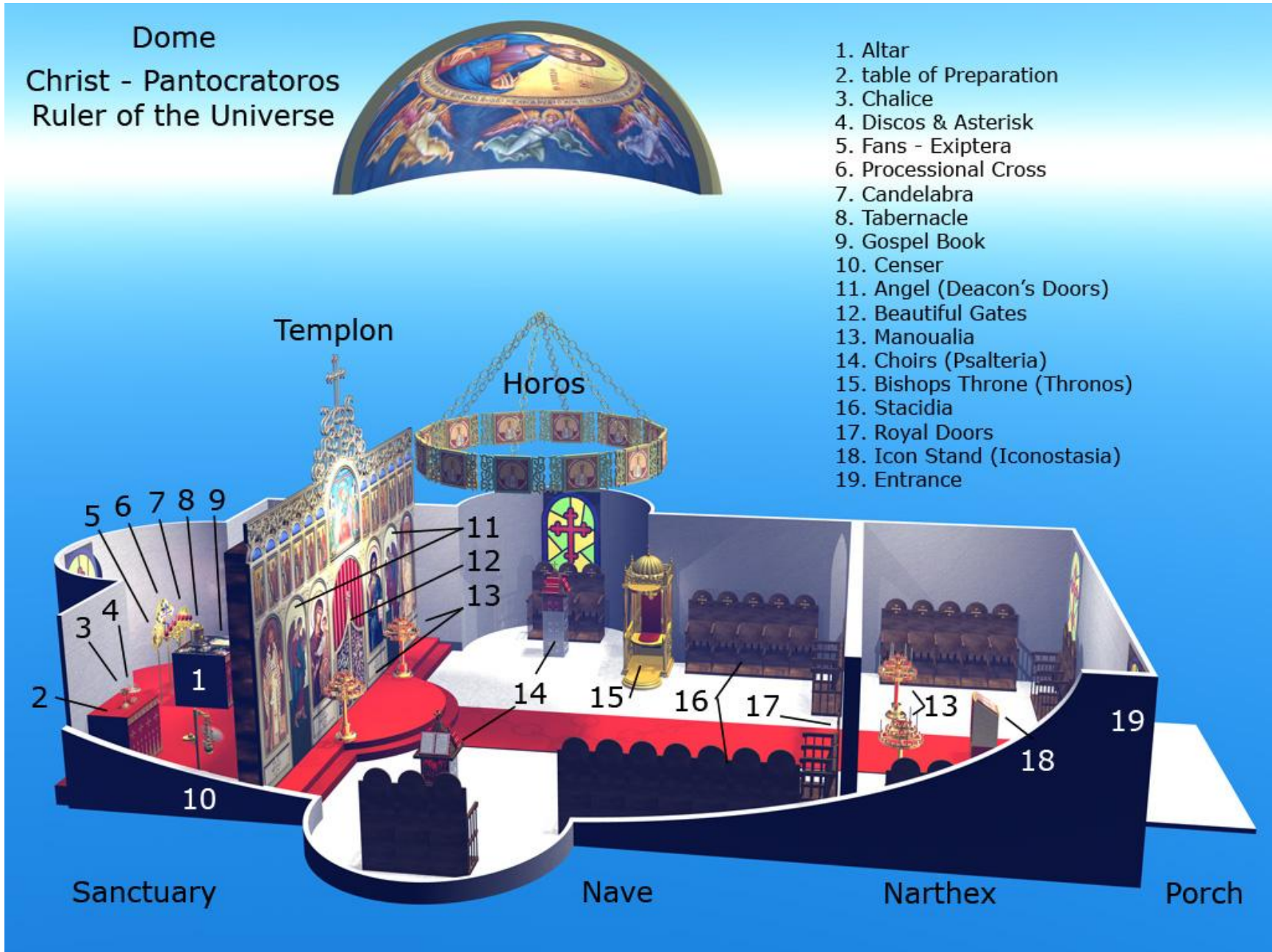
St. John of Kronstadt reveals this understanding of the Church in his work, My Life in Christ:

Truly the church is Heaven upon earth; for where the throne of God is, where the awful sacraments are celebrated, where the angels serve together with men, ceaselessly glorifying the Almighty, there is truly Heaven. And so let us enter into the house of God

with the fear of God, with a pure heart, laying aside all vices and every worldly care, and let us stand in it with faith and reverence, with understanding attention, with love and peace in our hearts, so that we may come away renewed, as though made Heavenly; so that we may live in the holiness natural to Heaven, not bound by worldly desires and pleasures. (Grinsbrooke, W. J.; Spiritual Counsels of Father John of Kronstadt, p. 75).

Since the Orthodox Church has always lived this mystical link between Heaven and earth, everything experienced in the Church is in response to this reality, pointing us to this reality. The Church building, the ordering of the Divine services, their actions, movements, images, smells, prayers and readings. It all acts to lead us into the throne room, granting access to the inaccessible.

The interior



As we noted, Orthodox churches vary somewhat architecturally. But, all Orthodox Churches are built to represent the universe. The ceiling represents Heaven. The opening in the ceiling (**dome**), within which is an icon of **Christ Pantocrator**, i.e., the all-ruling Christ, represents Christ looking down from Heaven upon the assembled congregation, hearing their prayers, reminding them of His presence in the whole universe. The floor of the Church, then, represents this world. The **Holy Altar(1)** is uplifted from the floor by a series of steps and suspended, as it were, between Heaven and earth, because it is the meeting point, the place where our gift to God is brought in the Great Entrance, and from which comes the Grace of God in the readings and teachings of the Holy Gospel, and the Grace of the Holy Mysteries.

The interior of an Orthodox church is divided into **three parts**.

The first part is the **Narthex**.

In ancient times it was a large, spacious place, from where the Catechumens were attending the mass and received instruction while preparing for Baptism. So, the Narthex of the Church represents this world in which mankind is called to repentance.

The icons on **Iconostasia (18)** (icon stands) at the entrance to the Church remind Orthodox Christians that Christ and the saints are invisibly present in this Holy Place, the Sacred space of the Church.

The **Manoualia (13)** are the places where we light up our candle. We light up candles so that to remember the light of Christ that we received in the Baptism and in which we should be leading our lives. That is why Baptism is also called Enlightenment. The flame of the candle reminds us also of the flame of Holy Spirit that came on the Disciples in Pentecost.

The second part is the **Nave**.

Nave is the main body of the church, separated from the **Sanctuary** (Holy Place) by an icon screen with doors, called the **Templon**. The walls of the Nave are decorated with icons and murals, before many of which are hanging lit lamps. The Nave is the place of the assembled Church, which includes both the living and the departed, the people of God.

The entrance to Nave is called **Royal Doors (17)** since it was the gate from which the Byzantine Emperor would enter the church. **Stacidia (16)** is a set of high-armed chairs with arm rests high enough to be used for support while standing and are usually found along the walls. Traditionally there was no sitting during services with the only exceptions being during the reading of the Psalms, and the priest's sermon. The people stand before God.

The **Bishop's throne (15)** is found in different places in the various traditions, but it is always set apart for the bishop who is considered to be the head of the Church and represents Jesus Christ. For this reason an icon of Christ enthroned is usually found there. The bishop occupies the throne during the Liturgy when he is not actually serving.

Psalteria (14) are called the choirs stand and the chanting and liturgical books are kept.

The third part is the **Sanctuary**.

The **Templon** / icon screen separates the **Nave** from the **Sanctuary**, just as the veil in the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple. But, this veil is no longer permanently closed: it has been opened by Christ Himself. On the **Templon** are placed icons of Christ, Mary and various other Saints. All these are a visible representation of an invisible reality. They reveal the presence of Christ and of His Saints gathered around His Throne. The second row of icons on some icon screens depicts the major events in the life of our Lord from the Annunciation to His Ascension. This serves as the Gospel in pictures, revealed to the assembled faithful.

During the services of the Orthodox Church, the deacon or priest censens with the **Censor (10)**. He first censens 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 God which every faithful Christian bears.

The **Sanctuary** lies beyond the **Templon** and is set aside for those who have a special function within the Divine services, and normally persons not consecrated to the service of the Church are not permitted to enter.

The **Beautiful Gates (12)** is the place from where the priest that is in the **Sanctuary** communicates with the people in **Nave** during the Services and passes the Grace of Holy Spirit to the faithful. It is also from where the priest, representing Christ, enters the **Sanctuary** after the Lesser and the Great Entrance during the Divine Liturgy.

The **Angels / Deacon's Doors (11)** are the doors that the clergy (when not in a Service) and the consecrated to the service of the church people will normally use when entering the Sanctuary. They usually have on them icons of either sainted deacons (Saint Stephen, Saint Lawrence, etc.) or the Archangels Michael and Gabriel.

Occupying the central place in the **Sanctuary** is the **Holy Altar (1)**, which represents the Throne of God, with the Lord Himself invisibly present there. The **Holy Altar (1)** is the point of meeting and union with God in His Kingdom.

On the **Holy Altar (1)** we find the **Gospel Book (9)**, the **Tabernacle (8)** and the **Candelabra (candlesticks) (7)**.

The **Tabernacle (8)** is kept on the center of the **Holy Altar (1)**. 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 Christ Himself Who dwells here. His precious Body and Blood are ever kept in the **Tabernacle (8)**. The Church, then, is truly the house of God. God is ever present here in a very real way. This is why the Orthodox Christian makes the sign of the cross whenever he passes before the Holy Altar.

The eternal light is the votive light that is suspended above the Tabernacle or burns before it on the altar table. It burns constantly to denote that the Lord Jesus Christ Who is the "Light of the World" is truly present.

Behind the **Holy Altar (1)** we find the **ProceSSIONAL Cross (6)** and the **Fans / Exiptera (5)**, used mainly in the Great Entrance procession that symbolizes Christ's Great Sacrifice in behalf of the people.

The procession is reminiscent of Jesus' Entrance into Jerusalem and culminates with the Cross at Golgotha. As the thief on Jesus' right said, "Be mindful of me, O Lord, when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom"; so the Priest in behalf of the faithful says, "Be mindful of us, O Lord, when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom". The Priest then re-enters the sanctuary through the **Beautiful Gates (12)**, places the Gifts on the Antimins (a cloth depicting Christ in the Tomb) which lies there unfolded on the **Holy Altar (1)**.

Exiptera (six wings) (5) have engraved on them 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 (1)**.

The **Table of Preparation (2)** is a small table to the left of the **Holy Altar (1)** behind the **Templon**. Here the people's gifts of bread and wine are prepared before the Divine Liturgy and later carried to the **Holy Altar (1)** during the Great Entrance.

On the **Table of Preparation (2)** we find the **Holy Chalice / Potirion (3)** and the **Disc & Asterisk (4)**. The **Holy Chalice (3)** represents the vessel which Jesus used at the Last Supper to serve the wine. It is where the bread and wine combined together are transfigured into the Body and Blood of Christ and from where the faithful take the Holy Communion. The **Disc & Asterisk (4)** are the vessels that carry safely the bread that represents the body of the Christ from the **Table of Preparation (2)** to the **Holy Altar (1)**.

Orthodox Churches are Holy Places. One meaning of the word "holy" is "set apart." In the case of our Churches they are set apart for God. There are rules about not entering certain areas, or touching certain objects. These rules are not so much bans or prohibitions but rather safeguards of that holiness, that being "set apart."

Even in the Nave area, the faithful should be careful not to stand on the Ambon, the raised area immediately in front of the **Beautiful Gates (12)**. This is because this area represents the Judgment Seat and we only stand there to receive the Holy Mysteries.

Those who are blessed to enter the **Sanctuary**, should enter through the Deacons' (side) Doors, unless they are required to enter through the Holy Doors during the Liturgy, while properly vested. Even then, only the priests and deacons (and in some practices, the subdeacons) are permitted to enter through the central doors.

In crossing from one side to the other in the **Sanctuary**, we always go behind (to the east) of the Holy Altar itself, unless, again, the service itself requires that one of the ministers walk across in front of the Altar, such as during a censuring of the Altar. Again only those who are at least subdeacons would be permitted to do this, and even they do not walk across that area or stand there unless it is required by the Liturgy.

Only bishops, priests or deacons are permitted to touch the **Holy Altar** or the **sacred vessels**. The sacred things kept there are only touched by the faithful when they are offered for their veneration by the priest, for instance the Gospel Book during Matins of the Resurrection on Sundays, and the Cross at the end of the Liturgy. This should draw the attention to the importance of these blessings.

Everything in the Orthodox Church is done with a blessing. And this is why we regard the seeming prohibitions against entering or touching things not as prohibitions but as our not having a blessing.

The Devine Liturgy

The following website will provide you with information regarding the Divine Liturgy practice.
<http://www.orthodoxchristian.info/pages/Liturgy.htm>

Icons

Icons are much more than just beautiful art or visual aids. Icons are windows through which the faithful see into the world beyond time and space. Just as Christ manifested and communicated God to us in His material body, so the Church today continues to use material things (wood, paint, etc.) to make God known to mankind.

An Orthodox icon depicts the transfiguration of the human body. It represents the saint's body transformed, transfigured by Grace in the Kingdom of God. The Saints represented in icons look straight into the eyes of their beholders, as if to say, "Here I am. I am very much alive in the presence of God."

Icons have an important role in the decoration of church buildings, in the church's worship and in personal devotion. They play several roles.

- They teach history, doctrine, morality and theology. They remind us what we are and what we should be. They show us the transfiguration of matter under the power of the Holy Spirit.
- They challenge. We see the saints, transfigured by God's grace and by their own free response to Him, we are challenged to follow in their footsteps.
- Icons witness. The icon of Christ witnesses to the Incarnation. The Divine logos came down into our humanity. He is human as we are human. Humans can be portrayed; portraying the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, we witness to His true humanity.
- Icons sanctify & unite. Photographs, films, videos of people we love can make them seem very close. The icons can make us feel very close to Christ and the saints. The icon is a doorway to the awareness of presence and the love of Christ and His saints and angels. They are already present with us, through their love and prayers; the icon reminds us, and makes us aware of that presence.

According to the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 A.D. in Orthodox Church "We decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honored and life-giving Cross, the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or of other suitable material, are to be exposed in the holy churches of God, on sacred instruments and vestments, on walls and panels, in houses and by public ways; these are the images of our Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ, and of Our Lady without blemish, the holy God-bearer, and of the revered angels, and of any of the saintly holy men."