

Church Architecture

Overview

It is important that we all understand what you “see” in church – as it represents the sacramental nature of the church.

The Church

Our word for church comes from the Greek word *kyriakon* which means “belonging to the Lord” and *ekklesia* – which means assembly. There are two ways to use the word church: (1) the physical building of worship and (2) as applied to the universal church of Christian peoples.



Catholics take our physical churches for granted but we have not always worshiped in buildings as we have today. The first Christians worshipped in homes and later in the catacombs – subterranean cemeteries. Worship in the catacombs actually existed right up until the 5th century as they were safe places for the early Christian to exercise their faith.

Let us review some of the things you may see in the construction and layout of a typical church – keeping in mind that actual churches vary from the very plain to very elaborate and ornate buildings.

General: Churches come in all sizes from those, which can seat a few dozen people to a few thousand. The church shown in the picture is Holy Cross Cathedral in Boston and is an example of an old world church.

Entrance: The entrance is often called a foyer, narthex, or gathering area. Here - in most churches, you will find a holy water font and a wide variety of accents or decorations. Before mass begins you may be greeted by fellow parishioners at the entrance.

Sacristy: The sacristy is where the holy sacramentals are stored. These sacramentals include such items as the hosts, wine, vestments, and sacred vessels. Often this area is used for the priests to change into vestments and as a gathering place prior to the beginning of mass for the other ministers of the altar.

Confessional: Every Catholic Church has one or more confessional – and you will typically be able to find it along one of the walls near the entrance. Typically, you will find a series of red and green lights to let the penitents know whether Father is available. Older churches may still have this as a free standing “box”.

Sanctuary: The sanctuary is where you will find the altar, where the mass is celebrated and consecration of the bread and wine takes place. It is the most holy place in any church and should be treated as such. Most churches place the tabernacle in or near the sanctuary. In another article we will cover the items you will find in the sanctuary.

Seating area: Between the entrance and sanctuary is where the faithful sit – keeping in mind that the early church stood for the complete celebration.

Other decorations: Most churches will have icon representations of the Stations of the Cross along both sides of the church. You may also see paintings, stained glass and statues – all intended to foster good worship.