

Catholic

UPDATE

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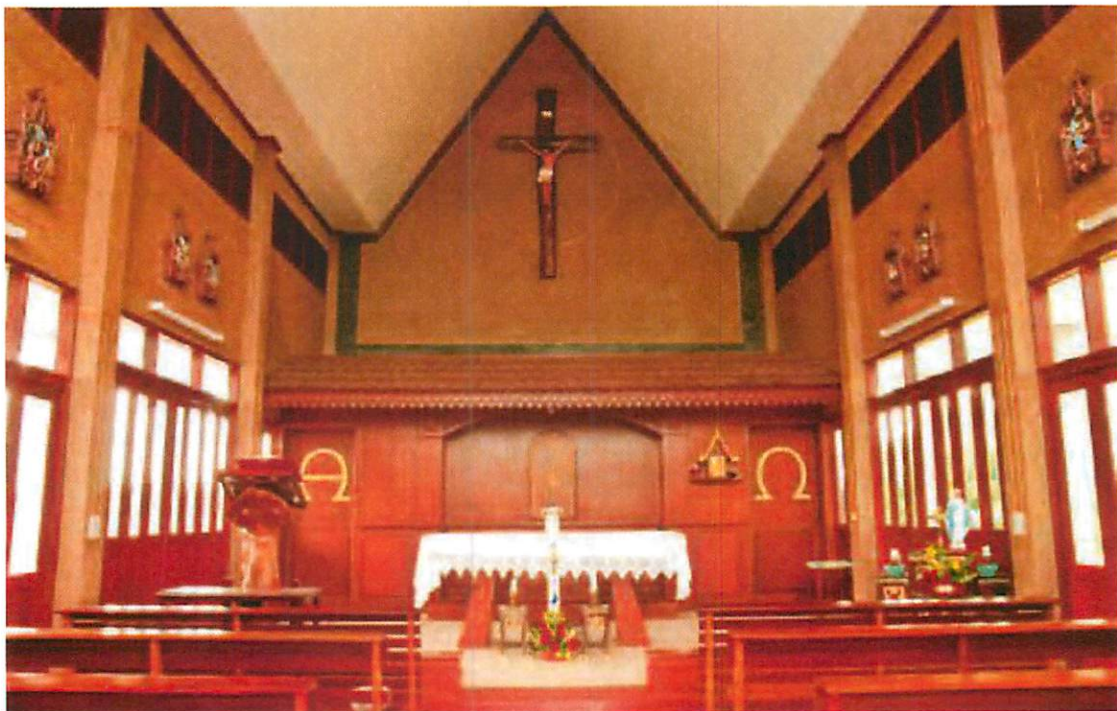
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A TOUR OF A CATHOLIC CHURCH

The interior of a Catholic church is a trove of holy treasures. But what do they mean? *by Thomas Richstatter, OFM*



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Whenver we invite non-Catholic friends to Sunday Mass, or a wedding or funeral, we find they are sometimes confused by the many symbols they find there. Catechumens and those seeking to join the Church want to know about the objects used in Catholic worship. In this *Update* we will take a tour of a Catholic church and answer some of these questions.

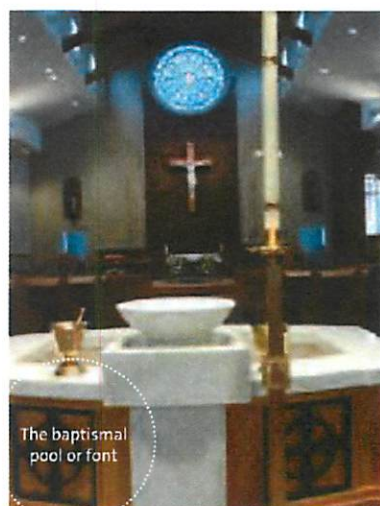
ENTERING THE CHURCH

One of the first things we see when we enter many Catholic churches is a pool of water. Baptism is our “door” to the Church. It is the way we enter Christ’s family. The baptismal pool, or baptismal font, which ideally stands at the door of the church, 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. In some churches a bowl of water, a holy water font, at each door serves as a reminder of the baptismal pool.

Standing by the baptismal pool 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 will 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.

In more recently constructed churches, you may also observe in this baptismal area the door leading to the reconciliation chapel, a small room designed for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.



The baptismal pool or font

CNS PHOTO/MARY ANN WYAND, THE CRITERION



The three oils

CNS PHOTO/KAREN CALAWAY

In some churches 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 grille from the place for the penitent to kneel and confess his or her sins.

THE ASSEMBLY AREA

Entering the church proper, the nave (from the Latin word for “boat”), we find ourselves in a large room. 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! Standing is a mark of reverence and readiness.

In the 13th century, kneeling benches were introduced, often attached to the back of the chairs or pews. You will see kneelers in most churches today.

Around the walls of many churches you will find the Way of the Cross, depictions (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. The faithful go to each of the stations and meditate on an event of the Passion.

FOCUS OF THE SACRED ACTION

From wherever we stand in the church, our attention is drawn to the sanctuary, 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.

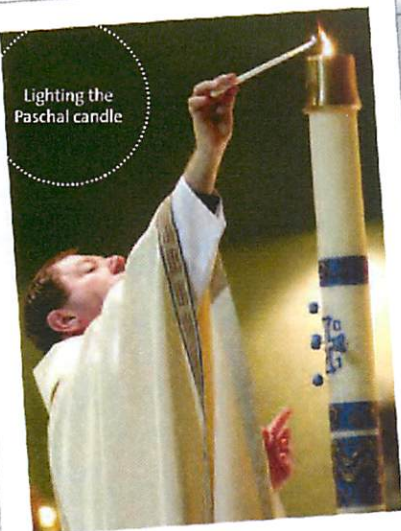
DIG DEEPER

What part of the interior of a church deepens your faith or enhances your prayers?

What elements of a church interior do you find puzzling?

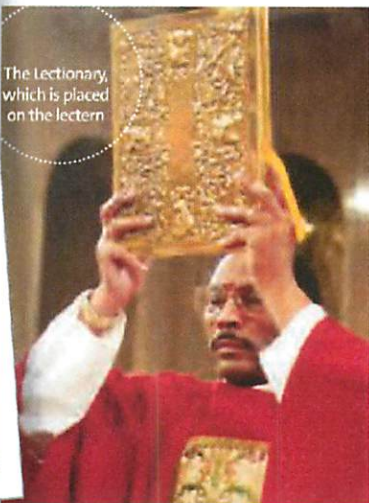
Which kind of building do you prefer: modern or traditional? Why?

Lighting the
Paschal candle



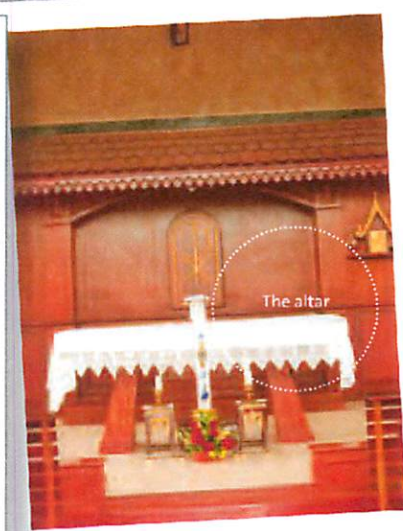
CNS PHOTO/KAREN CALLAWAY, NORTHWEST INDIANA CATHOLIC

The Lectionary,
which is placed
on the lectern



CNS PHOTO BY NANCY WITCHEC

The altar



© SURABKY/PHOTOXPRESS

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 for "chair"), gives name to the entire building, cathedral. Each church will have a *presider's chair* or bench and seating for the other ministers.

Also in this focus area we see a reading stand, a *lectern*, from which we proclaim the Word of God and upon which is placed the *Lectionary*, the book of readings from sacred Scripture.

In some churches you may see a second, very simple lectern, which is used by the song leader and reader of the announcements.

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'" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 47).

When the Eucharist is celebrated the table is covered with an altar cloth or tablecloth. On the altar are placed the bread and wine for Mass. The bread is on a *bread plate* or *paten* (from *patella*, meaning "platter," "plate") and the wine is

poured into a chalice (from *calyx*, the Latin word for "cup" or "goblet").

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

Today, with increasing frequency, we will not find a tabernacle, in which the Blessed Sacrament is kept, on our tour of the assembly area of a Catholic church.

The very important and serious reasons for taking the tabernacle from the altar in the sanctuary area and placing it in its own *eucharistic chapel* are explained in the bishops' statement on the environment for worship: "The celebration of the Eucharist is the focus of the normal Sunday assembly. As such, the major space of a church is designed for this action. Beyond the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church has had a most ancient tradition of reserving the eucharistic bread. The purpose of this reservation is to bring communion to the sick and to be the object of private devotion. Most appropriately, this reservation should be designated in a space designed for individual devotion" (*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* 78).

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 is present there. Other candles will be found in both devotional areas and the assembly area of the church. Once they were primarily used to give light for reading the Scriptures and celebrating the sacred action. The symbolic function of the candles remains: the candle consumes itself in service of the sacred mysteries. 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.

(continued on back page)

The tabernacle,
right, holds
the Blessed
Sacrament



CNS PHOTO/GREGORY L. TRACY, THE PILOT

(continued from page 3)

STATUES, ART, AND LIVING SAINTS

Another high point in a tour of a Catholic church was often the *reredos* (from *arrere*, “rear,” and *dos*, “back”), the statues and paintings on the back of the altar together with their beautiful and elaborately carved shrines, a carryover from medieval times.

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 are intercessors for particular favors and blessings.

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. Their artistic beauty reveals to us something of the beauty of God and God’s dreams for us.

In our day the principal “decoration” and “treasured possession” of the church is the worshipping community. Faces of the saints have always aided our worship, and we continue to revere our sisters and brothers in Christ of other ages.

Our tour may have led us through a great variety of Catholic churches: some with many statues and some which have none—through churches with golden altars and ceilings and those with wooden altars and plaster ceilings. But as in the homes of my friends, where some have more money than others and perhaps more expensive decorations and furnishings, more



VESTMENTS

Vestments, the special ritual clothing worn by those who lead the assembly in prayer, are “an appropriate symbol of their service” (*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* 93) 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!

Since the ninth century the priest has also worn a stole, a long piece of cloth about 4 inches wide draped around the neck. The origin and meaning of this vestment is lost in history.

important than the cost of the furniture are the warmth, hospitality, and friendship I experience there.

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.

Thomas Richstatter, OFM, has a doctorate in liturgy and sacramental theology from the Institut Catholique de Paris. A popular writer and lecturer, Father Richstatter teaches courses on the sacraments at St. Meinrad (Indiana) School of Theology.

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