

Lesson 2: The Narthex

First Things First

For most Orthodox parishioners narthex is the entry to worship. This isn't by accident as we will discuss in today's lesson. Far from simply being nice looking entry way, the narthex has deeper significance for us.

Narthex

The first place we come to when we go into the Church is called the **narthex**.

The narthex is like a porch or entryway that one comes to before going into a house. If the nave is where the faithful gather to worship, and represents part of God's kingdom. While in the narthex however, we are still considered in *this world*.

The first prayer we offer up when going to Church is in the narthex. At Saint John's there are icons of Christ, the Theotokos and Saint John the Baptist. We kiss God's Saints in reverence and prayerfully light a candle.



St. John the Baptist

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven (Matthew 5:16).

We should see the symbolism of being in this world, praying, and then entering into God's Kingdom.

In most Orthodox Churches, we enter from the West end of the building. The Sanctuary where the altar is, and where a portion of the Eucharist and thereby God's presence, are on the East end of the building. This is to remind us that as the Sun rises in the East giving light, so we enter from the darkness of the West and seek the light of God.

What other things have you ever noticed or thought about when entering the narthex?

Now that we know a little more about its symbolic message and how we use the narthex today, let's look at how it was used in the past.

Early in the Church the narthex was usually large. This is because that is where catechumens who wanted to become part of the Church were taught. They were not allowed in the nave during most of the Divine Liturgy. This took up to three years! Only the baptized faithful were allowed into the nave during Liturgy.

The narthex could also be an area of punishment. When the Priest decided that someone's sins were serious enough to prevent them from receiving Communion, they could only enter the narthex. From here they would plead for the prayers of the faithful as they entered the Church. This shows us that men can remove themselves from God by their sins and become unworthy to stand with God's faithful in worship of Him.

How is this like what we know about judgment day?

There was also a Baptismal Font (tub) large enough for an adult to be fully submerged as part of their Baptism into the Church.

In the early Church the narthex was also used for a meal at the end of Liturgy. In some monasteries the narthex still serves as a dining room to this day.

In Eastern Churches, the narthex is also where funeral services are held for the dead.

Sounds like a lot busier place than we give it credit doesn't it?

Next Lesson: The Nave