

## Lesson 5: Exploring the Sanctuary

### About the Sanctuary

Up to this point, we have explored the parts of the Church where lay people worship God, the narthex and the nave. Now we will move into the most sacred part of the Church, the Sanctuary (Agion Vema).

In Greek it is called the Agion Vema, which is literally “holy raised floor”. The Sanctuary is raised since it is the most holy part of the interior of the Church. Since it’s the most holy part, entrance into it is only for those who have some part in the divine services of the Church. Another name for it in Greek is “Agia Agion” or “Holy of Holies”. We say this because it is where the most holy of sacraments is celebrated, the Holy Eucharist. In fact there is always a small portion of the Eucharist in the Sanctuary, so we can say that Christ is actually in the Sanctuary. Its not just another area of the Church for us, and should always be looked upon reverently (as should all parts of God’s house.)

### What’s In there?

The most important things in the sanctuary are the Altar Table (Agia Trapeza), the Table of Oblations (Prothesis), the Vestry, the Holy Cross and the icons of Cherubs .

### The Altar Table

Of all the things in the sanctuary, it is really the Altar Table that is the center of the Church. All things in the Church point to it because of what it represents and is kept on and inside of it. At Saint John’s, the front of the Altar contains a scene from the last supper, but this is only part of the message of the Altar. To the Orthodox it is symbolic of the presence of the heavenly throne and table of the Kingdom of God; the table of Christ the Word, the Lamb and the King of the ever-lasting life of God's glorified dominion over all of creation. It is the “table of God’s Kingdom” (Luke 28:30)

The Altar is always simply constructed, normally of stone or wood and covered with colorful material to portray its heavenly nature. It will sit on top of either a column, symbolizing our Savior and the founder of the Church, or four small columns that symbolize the four Evangelists who wrote the Gospels.

■ *Question: Why are the four Gospels so important to us?*

### Things on and in the Altar

#### *Relics of Saints*

When the Bishop consecrates the Church, a small silver box containing the relic of a Saint is placed into a special compartment of the Altar. Since the earliest times of the Christian Church, the faithful have venerated the martyrs and Saints who sacrificed themselves for the Church. In the early days of the Christian Church, people were killed by the thousands for their belief in Christ. Since Christians couldn’t bury their dead above ground, the graves were in underground caves called catacombs. They also held Liturgy in these caves, using the tomb of a martyr as their Altar Table.

The placement of a Saint’s relics into the Altar represents that the Church founded by Christ is based upon the their blood and sacrifices.

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*Things on the Altar*

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- Antimension: Cloth depicting Christ in the tomb which contains the signature of the bishop and is the permission for the local community to gather as the Church. "Antimension" means literally "instead of the table." Since the bishop is the proper pastor of the Church, the Antimension is used instead of the bishop's own table which is, obviously, in his own church building, the cathedral -- the place where the bishop has his chair (cathedra).
- Gospel: There is always a book of the Gospels kept on the Altar. The Gospels are the first four books of the Bible and tell the "good news" of Christ's life and His teachings. They were written by His disciples who were filled with the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost after Christ's resurrection.
- Small Cross: Used by the Priest to bless worshippers during the Liturgy.
- Tabernacle: This is a special container, often in the shape of a Church building, in which communion gifts (the Body and Blood of Christ) are kept for the sick and dying. Behind the tabernacle is a seven branched candle stand which is from the ancient Jewish, Temple traditions.
- Large Wooden Cross: This is actually behind the Altar and is the Cross on which Christ is nailed upon. This the Cross used during Good Friday services for the unnauling ceremony.
- Icons of Cherubs: To the right and left of the Crucifix behind the Altar are the icons of the Cherubs (Exaptergya). These icons show an image of the six winged angels which represent the Seraphim and Cherubim talked that the prophet Isaiah described as guarding the Throne of God. As we believe God to be present at the Altar, the significance of these Angels is that they guard God's throne.

### **Table of Oblations or Offerings (Proskomide)**

To the left of the Altar is the Table of Oblations. This is where the Priest before the Divine Liturgy prepares the bread and wine. They will be carried to the Altar during the "Great Entrance". The preparation takes place at an early morning service called the Orthros

In many Churches, this area will be set into the wall to signify that Christ was born in a cave, and will also be decorated with an icon of the Nativity.