

This short essay describes the architectural elements of a Catholic. The architecture of a church is designed to teach and to elevate – to teach us about salvation history and to elevate our thoughts and prayers from this world to the Next. While this essay describes on church building in specific, the features described are typical of a Roman Catholic Church.

**A Microcosm of Salvation History**  
**Saint John the Evangelist Catholic Church, Vancouver, Washington**

*This is God's dwelling among men. He shall dwell with them and they shall be his people and he shall be their God who is always with them. --Ez 37:27 and Rev 21:3*

We are a pilgrim Church – a people on a journey towards the Heavenly Kingdom. Every step on our pilgrimage should bring us closer to God Almighty. As we enter St. John's, we journey from the outside world into the narthex; an informal gathering place. The narthex gives a chance to take a deep breath and transition to a more prayerful state of mind; to gather our thoughts. The glass walls and doors that separate the narthex from the nave allow us to glimpse "life on the other side" and to remember that we are here to worship in fellowship, to sing praise to God in the communion of saints, to build the Body of Christ, and to look forward to the time when we fully enter into the Kingdom.

**The Nave (the "ship")**

The nave (from Latin: ship) is the formal name of the primary gathering place for worship in the church. The Barque of Peter (Peter's ship) is a symbol of the Church; the Church that brings us to the Lord.

*So he said to them, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish. So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish.*  
*--Jn 21: 6-8*

Many architectural features in St. John's are reminiscent of a ship including the sloped and tapered ceiling over the choir niche, the Marian niche, the ambo (pulpit), the altar, and the ceiling of the church itself. As members of the Body of Christ, we are all literally "in the same boat" – an important thing for us to always keep in mind:

*Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or*

*Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. --1 Cor 12: 12-14, 26-27*

## **Baptistery**

As we enter through the center doors into the nave, we immediately come upon the baptistery (baptismal fount). Often the water is flowing before and after mass symbolizing the living waters of baptism. It is quieted during mass so that it does not distract from the liturgy. The baptismal fount is located at the entry way to remind us how it is we first entered the Church; that is, through baptism. From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 1217-1222:

*In the liturgy of the Easter Vigil, during the blessing of the baptismal water, the Church solemnly commemorates the great events in salvation history that already prefigured the mystery of Baptism:*

*Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power. In Baptism we use your gift of water, which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament.*

*At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the wellspring of all holiness.*

*The waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of Baptism, that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness.*

*You freed the children of Abraham from the slavery of Pharaoh, bringing them dry-shod through the waters of the Red Sea, to be an image of the people set free in baptism.*

*Finally, Baptism is prefigured in the crossing of the Jordan River by which the People of God received the gift of the land promised to Abraham's descendants, an image of eternal life. The promise of this blessed inheritance is fulfilled in the New Covenant.*

*Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of its street. -- Rev 22:1*

In remembrance of our own baptism and its significance, it is common practice as we enter the nave to dip our fingers in the baptismal waters and while gazing upon the crucifix in the sanctuary, making a sign of the cross.

*Are you not aware that we who are baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Through baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. Rom 6:1*

## **Easter Candle**

This tall white candle can be found either near the baptistery (as it is lit for all baptisms) or, for special feasts, it will be in the sanctuary. It is first lit at the Easter Vigil service. At that celebration it is dipped into the baptismal water signifying the Holy Spirit coming down to us, creating new life in us. The candle signifies the light of Christ present to the world.

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. --Gn 1:1-4*

## **Communion of Saints**

At the back corners of the nave, we see statues of Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta and Saint Vincent de Paul. These remind us that the faithfully departed are still active living members of the Body of Christ. We rely on the prayerful intercession of all members of the Body of Christ; those that are alive on earth and those that are alive in heaven.

*Day and night they do not stop exclaiming:  
"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come."  
--Rev 4:8*

*Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne. The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel. --Rev 8:3-4*

The statues are not forms of "idol worship" as some fear. The statues are not to be prayed to. They are family portraits that adorn the house of God. From the beginning, God has requested holy images to adorn the most holy place, the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle.

*Make two cherubim of beaten gold for the two ends of the propitiatory, fastening them so that one cherub springs direct from each end. The cherubim shall have their wings spread out above, covering the propitiatory with them; they shall be turned toward each other, but with their faces looking toward the propitiatory. This propitiatory you shall then place on top of the ark. --Ex 25: 18-21*

## **Marian Niche**

On the right side of the nave is the Marian niche. This is to give special honor to the Mother of our Lord. It is through her that Jesus became man, the Salvation of the world. She is the perfect role-model. Never did she hesitate to say "yes" to the Lord.

*Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." --Lk 1:38*

*And Mary said:*

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. --Lk 1:46-49*

*A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. --Rev 12:1-2, 5*

### **The Sanctuary**

The sanctuary, or “holy place,” is the New Covenant fulfillment of the Holy of Holies. The Word of God is preached from the sanctuary and the Eucharistic celebration takes place at the altar. In the Old Covenant, at the heart of the Temple of Jerusalem, was the Holy of Holies; the very dwelling place of God. It was so sacred that no one was allowed to enter or even gaze upon the Holy of Holies. It was kept “hidden” by a veil. Only on the Day of Atonement was the High Priest allowed to enter in order to atone for the sins of Israel.

*Moses could not enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud settled down upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. --Lev 1:35*

*The Lord spoke to Moses and said to him: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he pleases into the inner sanctuary, inside the veil, in front of the cover on the ark, lest he die, for I reveal myself in a cloud above the ark’s cover. --Lev 16:2*

Sanctuaries are often set apart from the nave by steps or an altar rail. In Saint John’s, the side altar rails are decorated with stocks of wheat (signs of the Bread of Life) and three steps separate the sanctuary from the nave. In ancient Judaism, there were three “heavens”: the first is the firmament of the sky, the second is the realm of stars and planets, and the third is God’s dwelling. As we ascend the three steps, we leave earth and enter God’s dwelling place. During the Eucharistic celebration, God comes down from on-high to dwell in and among us in the form of Jesus’ most precious body and blood.

There are many notable aspects of the sanctuary:

### **Temple Curtain (Veil) and Crucifix**

Along the side walls of the sanctuary hang two “banners” – one to the right and one to the left extending from the ceiling to the floor. These may symbolize the curtain in the Temple that veiled the Holy of Holies. The Temple’s curtain was torn in two as Jesus breathed His last.

*On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face; the reproach of his people he will remove from the whole earth; for the Lord has spoken. --Is 25:6-10*

*Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" --Mk 15:37-39*

When the curtain was torn, the "face of God" was revealed to humanity. From the very beginnings of creation, God knew that Christ would die on the cross in order to redeem man. This Truth was revealed, full of mystery, on that first Good Friday. From that moment on, the Holy of Holies would no longer be hidden from man. The Truth of salvation has been revealed and God the Father can now be approached through the Son.

To remind us of this the greatest act of love by which our salvation was won, at the center of the back sanctuary wall hangs the crucifix. From the very beginning of scripture, we see signs that God would redeem the world through the death of His Son on a cross. The torn veil reveals this mystery.

*On the third day Abraham caught sight of the place from a distance. So Abraham took the **wood** for the burnt offering and laid **it on his son** Isaac, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. "Father!" he said. "Here I am," he replied. Isaac continued, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" "My son," Abraham answered, "**God will provide the sheep** for the burnt offering." -- Gn 22:4, 6-8*

*The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt... Your lamb must be a year-old male and without blemish. ...with the whole community of Israel assembled, it will be slaughtered during the evening twilight. They will take some of its blood and apply it to the **two** (wooden) **doorposts and the lintel** of the houses in which they eat it. That same night **they shall eat its roasted flesh with unleavened bread** and bitter herbs.... This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the Lord, as a perpetual institution. --Ex 12:1, 5-8, 14*

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the greatest act of love ever expressed in the cosmos. The Great Pascal Mystery, the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, is the very center of the Christian Faith. The crucifix reminds us of this Greatest Sacrifice, this Greatest Love.

*He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. --Phil 2:8.*

*He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day." --Lk 24: 6-7*

*Then he said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." --Lk 9: 23-24*

*For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. --Rev 7:17*

### **Sorrowful Mary, Saint John the Evangelist**

On each side of the Crucifix are statues of the sorrowful Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist. In essence, at every mass, as the Body of Christ the Church places itself at the foot of the cross partaking in this the Greatest Sacrifice uniting itself with Christ. At the cross, Jesus gave his mother to the Church in persona of Saint John.

*Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted and you yourself a sword will pierce so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." -- Lk 2:34-35*

*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. --Jn 19:26-27*

### **The Altar and Tabernacle**

Our altar is a rock; symbolic of strength, steadfastness, the foundation of the church. The altar is rough on the outer edges (like us), smooth, polished and beautiful on the surface; a reflection of God. It is here that we celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb. It is at this altar that Christ, working through his priest, becomes present to us; body, blood, soul and divinity. This is the focal point of Catholic worship.

*Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. --Rev 19:7-8*

Behind the altar is the Tabernacle. It contains consecrated hosts; reserved for adoration. Next to the Tabernacle is the lit tabernacle candle. It reminds us that the Holy Spirit (which it signifies) and the Son are together at work in the world.

It is true that God dwells in all things; therefore, all things are his dwelling place. However, it is also true that his "dwelling" varies – he dwells in men and women differently than he dwells in inanimate objects. For the Israelites, the Holy of Holies was in a very significant way *The Dwelling Place of God*.

*Then the cloud covered the meeting tent, and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling. Moses could not enter the meeting tent, because the cloud settled down upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling. -- Ex 40:34-35.*

How awesome it must have been for Jewish worshipers to have a special place on earth that Almighty God dwelt! Imagine the awe and reverence that the Tabernacle and later the Temple inspired! Jesus did not come to destroy that.

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. --Mt 5:17*

How did the Temple, the dwelling of God, become “fulfilled” in Christ? Forty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. It has never been rebuilt. But the True Temple was not destroyed. Jesus is the True Temple.

*"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." --Jn 2:19*

*You are built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. Every structure knit together in him grows into a holy temple in the Lord; and you too, in him, are being built up into a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit.*  
*--Eph2:20-22*

He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. We are now tabernacles of the Lord – and we should always remember that the Glory of God dwells within us and our neighbors! We are the Body of Christ. We enter the Body through baptism, we are fed in the Eucharist; we become what we eat. For that very reason, Christ Jesus commands us to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood.

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. -- Jn 6:51, 55-56.*

*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." -- Jn 1:29*

*Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins." --Mt 26:27-28*

*Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb." --Rev 19:9*

*"In the earthly liturgy we share in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle. With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, until he, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory." -- Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1090*