

UNDERSTANDING THE CATHOLIC MASS

(Researched and compiled by Bernie Ramis for the Roman Catholic Churches of Vernon)

I. Understanding Sacred Space (Part 1)

Sacred architecture is never accidental. In Catholic tradition, sacred space is designed to tell a story. Every arch, every piece of furniture, and every designated zone is a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality. The physical layout actually dictates how we move, how we pray, and how we encounter the divine.

The first physical space we encounter when we enter the church is the Narthex; it is the foyer or vestibule area just inside the main doors. It serves as a buffer zone between the busy, secular world outside and the sacred worship space inside. It is where you do your neighbourly greetings, and catching-up with friends. It is also where you start quieting your mind, heart, and spirit to prepare for prayer.

Historically, in the early Church, catechumens and penitents seeking reconciliation would stand in the Narthex during the Mass, as they were not yet fully integrated into the Eucharistic community. For us today, passing through the Narthex should remind us of our own baptismal entry into the Church and our belonging to this family of God. That is also why we have the holy water bowls or fonts (officially called stoups) at every door to bless ourselves.

Then we enter the Nave. This is the main body of the church where the congregation sits, stands, and kneels in the pews. It stretches from the edge of the Narthex up to the steps of the sanctuary.

The word "Nave" comes from the Latin word *navis*, meaning "ship" or boat (the root word for navy and navigate). This is deeply intentional. Symbolically, the Nave represents the *Navis Petri* or "the Boat of Peter". As we gather in the Nave, we are reminded that we are passengers on one vessel, the Church, traveling together toward our ultimate destination, heaven!

Proper decorum when you enter the nave is one of silence and reverence. Because from where we sit within the Nave, we cast our gaze to the Sanctuary.

Located at the front of the church, the Sanctuary is the elevated area where the liturgical action takes place. Because of the Sanctuary's sacred function, it is distinct from the Nave, often separated by steps, a change in flooring, or historically, an altar rail.

The word "Sanctuary" comes from the Latin *sanctus*, meaning "holy." It is elevated to signify that when the priest enters this space, he is stepping out of earthly time and into the heavenly liturgy. It is the focal point of the entire building because it houses the place of sacrifice and the presence of God.

So when you walk into a Catholic church, remember that you are not just walking into any other building. Every time we enter a Catholic church, we already go through a sort of procession even before Mass begins: You cross the threshold of the world through the Narthex, board the ship of salvation with the community gathered here in the Nave, and look toward the heavenly wedding feast that is truly, and really happening on the Sanctuary.