

Stepping into Heaven

“Dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in you we are joined together and rise up to become a living, holy building founded on you. In you we are truly built together to become a beautiful dwelling in which you live by your Spirit.”

(based on Ephesians 2:21-22)

Circle your answer in each pair:

1. When you walk into your church, you're thinking...

happy to be here *can't wait to leave*

2. You're sitting in the pew and see the priest come down the aisle in his vestments. These ornate clothes make you wonder...

why? *wow!*

3. As the service continues, do you feel it's

God and me *God and us*

4. When you look around you, do you feel

part of a family *a face in the crowd*

5. What's your view on communion?

take it or leave it *don't leave without taking it*

Sacred Space

There are as many kinds of churches as there are different groups of people who worship God. Places of worship usually reflect the basic beliefs of the people who gather in them. Sometimes they are sparse and bare, like meeting halls, built for people to hear and reflect on the Word of God. Sometimes they have lofty, pointed arches and spires, symbolic of a high and mighty God in heaven. Sometimes the walls are covered with sacred paintings and ablaze with candles.

Stepping Into Heaven

Where We Are

Let's pretend we're entering church together. We step over the threshold. Do you know what threshold means? It's that little piece of raised wood in a doorway. It's from an old Anglo-Saxon (pre-English) word that literally means "door-wood" but the theory is that in early times, people covered their humble little huts with threshed wheat, like we cover floors with sawdust to absorb liquids or dirt (threshing is the process of separating the good part of the wheat from what's inedible) – and the "threshold" would keep the stuff from flying outside whenever people went in or out.



What's important about a threshold?

In the early church, to pass over the threshold of a church was to pass from the secular world to a sacred one. So it was always very special.

Who can think of a way the symbolic nature of the threshold is still important today? (Hint: it has to do with marriage.)

Yes! There used to be a tradition – and some still do it – of the groom carrying the bride over the threshold into their new home, where they will be reigning king and queen. And if you've ever been to an Armenian wedding, you know that the bride and groom sit on chairs, symbolic of thrones, and that they wear crowns. So it all points to their being king and queen of a new creation – their married life together.

The Narthex/vestibule – the world

Okay, we're over the threshold, now where are we? What's the first part of the church we come into?

The Narthex

We step over the threshold and come into what you might call the "lobby" of the church. We're definitely in the house but we're not yet in the main place.

Where do you find lobbies?

What do you generally do there?

In the same way, in the church lobby, we come in, get ready to enter, make a donation, pick up a candle, get the church bulletin, and exchange hellos with the greeters. We are preparing to enter the "main place."

This area was originally separated from the rest of the church by a screen or railing. It was here where anyone who wasn't a baptized Christian would have to go when others would prepare for and take communion. You can still hear the deacon say during *Badarak* "Mi vok herakhayeets... mertsestsee..." Մի՛ որ յերախաչից...մերձեցի... (Let none of those still preparing for baptism come near) right where the Eucharist part of the liturgy begins. That's a signal for non-Christians to leave. Of course this is purely symbolic now, but it's something to think about isn't it? Communion was and still is a serious event for believers, and true believers only!

Even now, all our churches separate the narthex from the rest of the church with doors or a screen.

? What Do I Do...

When the priest comes around in procession censuring us and holding out his hand cross?

If you're near enough to the aisle, approach him, kiss the hand cross and say "Heeshescheer yev zees arachee anmah kareenun Asdoodzoh or, in English, "Remember me, also, before the immortal Lamb of God."

The Nave

Leaving the church narthex, we enter the main space of the church. Now we have really entered a special place, the place where we gather as the worshipping Church. The name for the place where we sit in pews is called the nave.

Interestingly enough, this comes from the word for "boat" in Latin. And this really describes the place perfectly. Because we are on a journey, aren't we? We are the people of God, sitting together, and moving towards him in our prayers and hymns. So this big space, filled with seats and people in those seats, is like a huge ship, the ship of the church. By the way, if you go to Armenia or Jerusalem, the ancient churches certainly don't have pews. That's a modern invention. Standing was the basic worship position until more modern times.

So here we are, we get into our pew, cross ourselves, say a prayer – even if it's hello God this is so and so, I'm here. Amen. Anything at all really, maybe just some quiet time to focus on the journey ahead.

The Dome

Now let's say we're sitting down right in the middle of the church. And we look up. What do you see in almost all of our churches? Yes, a dome. From the outside it kind of imitates the shape of the building. On the inside it sometimes features paintings or stained glass windows. One of the important architectural characteristics of an Armenian church is a dome that sits atop intersecting

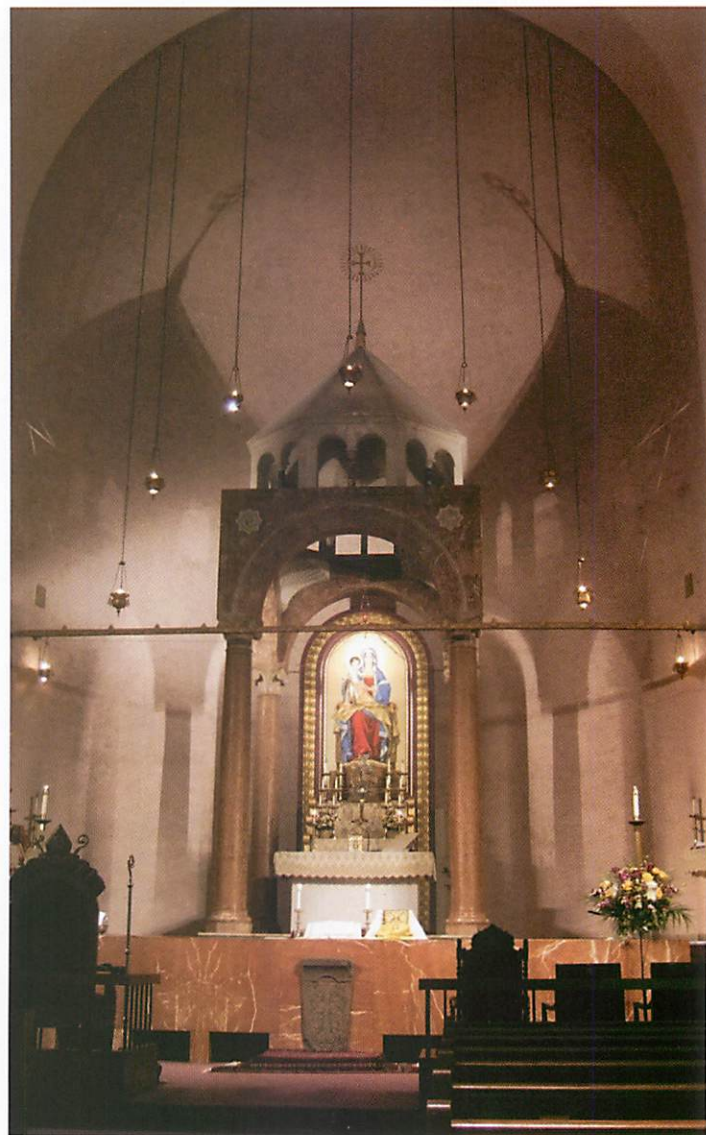
arches. This was distinctively Armenian, and it allowed a lot of empty space – no huge pillars that you might see in gothic cathedrals, for example.

What can the dome in the church's center remind us of?

So while every home has a roof – whether it's thatched, or tiled or tin – the church has a special roof that points us to heaven. But what's different about a dome is that it's like heaven itself– it's round, embracing, symbolically, everyone seated below. Also, there are times, such as for a *hoke-hankisd* (requiem) or funeral, when the priest and deacons gather under the dome to be closer to the people.

The Chancel

Okay. Liturgy has begun and we're praying and singing together and we're all facing in the same direction – even the priest. Unlike many other churches, including the Catholic and Protestant, the Armenian priest faces the altar with everyone else as he leads the community in worship. What direction are we facing? North? West?





Dictionary Definitions

Narthex: Portico or lobby of an early Christian church, originally separated from the nave by a railing or screen; an entrance hall leading to the nave of a church, from the Greek for box and fennel (a stalk-shaped plant).

Nave: The central part of a church, extending from the narthex to the chancel, from the Latin for ship, *navus*. Interestingly, the Armenian word for ship is *nahv*. Could also be a corruption of the Greek for "temple": *naos*.

East - where every Armenian altar is set. We face East where the sun rises, and from where the Lord will return at the Second Coming.

We see first a sort of intermediate area, don't we, right below the altar? This is called the chancel (in Armenian, *adyan*). The chancel has been described as the place where we make our case, as if in court (only in this case the Judge, symbolically present at the altar above and before us, is compassionate). What are some things you see here? Chairs. A bishop's chair, too, one a bit fancier and higher than the others. This is a symbol too.

What is the meaning of the bishop's chair...?

Here, you'll see the podium from where the lections are read – not the Gospel, which is read *from..... where?* The _____. But the readings from the Old Testament, and the New Testament (aside from the Gospels) are read from the lectern or reading stand in the chancel. It's called a _____ in Armenian.

Whom do we see besides the reader in the chancel? The _____ and _____(s) assemble there at certain



Who's Who: The Bishop

From the Greek, "episcopos" for "overseer," the bishop is the highest order of ministers and, in the Armenian Church, is the only rank able to confer holy orders (ordain into the ministry). Bishops are generally assigned to be head of an entire district of churches or Diocese. The New Testament often refers to "presbyter" (meaning "priest") and "episcopos" interchangeably but by the middle of the 2nd century a threefold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon had evolved (it took a few centuries more for these to be fully distinguished in the Armenian Church) and all major centers of Christianity had a bishop as regional administrator.

times – for example, when the priest confesses and ritually washes his hands or at the end of liturgy for the last blessing and dismissal. And often, this is where the choir assembles and sings. The Bible tells us that the angels are singing God's praises around the clock so we, too, join with the choir in singing.

Of course, you will certainly remember that it's in the chancel where we go to kneel and confess our sins before we take communion. Often the chancel is divided from the pews with a gate or a railing, often described as the "gates of heaven." So as we move from the threshold to the altar, we are that much closer to "heaven."



The Armenian Angle

In the Armenian Church, the sanctuary is separated from the faithful by a curtain which is usually open to signify that Christ has opened the way for us to the heavenly sanctuary. It is closed at specific moments during the Liturgy; it is also closed during Great Lent, to remind us of our exile from Paradise as a result of sin.

The Altar

So we're sitting, and standing, and praying and singing and of course our eyes are looking forward and our faces are forward and we see before and above us, what? Yes, the altar.

The altar sits on a raised stage called a _____. But the altar is the holiest place in the church. Why? It is the place where Christ _____ and where, through the power of the _____, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood.

What else do you see on the altar? _____

The altar is always free-standing, so that the various processions can go around it.

The Gospel book is also on the altar, enthroned, in a way as Christ himself is present. This is the table of God's Kingdom (Luke 28:30).

The *jajanch* contains a martyrs' relic, a symbol of how the church is founded on the lives of saints and martyrs.

So, let's remember that journey and these basic places. Summarize in a simple phrase, the definition and importance of each:

The Narthex _____

The Nave _____

The Dome _____

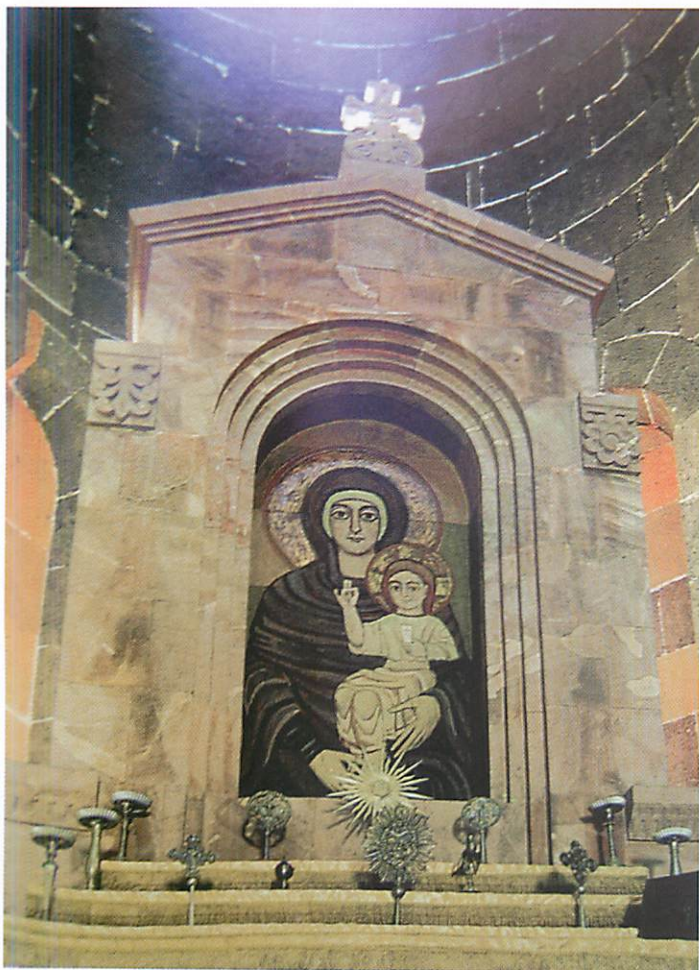
The Chancel _____

The Bema _____

The Altar _____

The Least You Need to Know

- ✓ The appearance and structure of a church reflect the basic beliefs of the people who gather there.
- ✓ The narthex, nave, dome, chancel, bema, and altar are basic “places” in the church building, each with theological/symbolic meaning.
- ✓ The Church was established by Christ as his Body, as a “living, holy building.”
- ✓ We are members of that Body and living stones in that spiritual building that is the Church.



Up Close and Personal



1 Peter 2: 4-5; 9-10.

4. As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by mortals but chosen by God and precious to him – 5. you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...9. you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

1. Circle all verbs. Do you see a movement, a series of steps and their results? Explain.
2. What images does Peter use to describe us?
3. What’s so powerful about the image of each one of us being “a living stone?”

QUICK QUIZ

Fill-in

Provide the correct word for the definition.

1. Sits atop intersecting arches, mimicking the canopy of heaven. _____
2. From the Greek for “overseer,” the highest of the three ordained orders in the Armenian Church.

3. The raised stage where the altar is found.

4. The beautiful image describing all Christians as parts of a spiritual building.

5. The main body of the church, from the Latin for “ship.” _____
6. The church lobby or foyer.

7. The space between the nave and the altar.
