

## HOW LOVELY IS YOUR DWELLING PLACE



*Heavenly King, Consoler, Spirit of truth, present in all places and filling all things, the Treasury of blessings and the Giver of life: come, O Good*

*One, and dwell in us. Cleanse us of all stain and save our souls."*

This prayer begins every service in the Byzantine Churches. It clearly teaches that God is everywhere and especially within the faithful themselves. Why then, do we Eastern Catholics feel the need to build churches and to pray to God in them? If God is everywhere, what need is there of a church building? Tradition dating back to the Old Testament answers our question.

God is eternal and omnipresent – that is, He exists outside the dimensions of space and time. But mankind lives in a finite world marked especially by space and time. We live here. We live now.

The problem then arises: how to live here and now with our God who exists beyond space and time? Mankind vacillated between two tendencies: either to worship God in everything and everyone (pantheism), or to say that God, being outside time and space, is nowhere and therefore non-existent, (atheism).

The solution lay beyond the groping minds of natural man until God Himself showed the way in the Old Testament. By creating sacred space and sacred time, God enabled humanity to experience His presence everywhere and always – a Divine Presence beyond the realm of the senses. From the Ark of the Covenant to the Temple in Jerusalem with its regular sequence of prayer and sacrifice during the hours of the day and night, the Old Testament Church was brought into communion with the Eternal and Everywhere God.

In the New Testament this movement of Divine Condescension brought to perfection: Christ Himself becomes the New Temple and all those baptized into Him become other Christs manifesting God's presence here and now.

For this reason Christians build church buildings where they can come together – apart from the gloom of this world – to realize their role as bearers of light in the darkness. *"In Your Light we shall see the light"* (Psalm 35:9, LXX). Here the Christian beholds the luminous splendour of God as a sign of his own calling to irradiate the world with the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the church building, of its very nature, must be different from the dismal world around it. It must be nobler, more beautiful. In the Latin tradition, it is drawn heavenward by one or more lofty spires pointing to the *"be-all and end-all"* of life, Christ reigning triumphantly from His Cross. In the East the church is crowned by a spacious dome, emblem of heaven descending to earth, in which we see the All-powerful Christ into Whom we are being transformed.

## SANCTIFYING A HOLY PLACE



After we have lavished every perfection of human skill on building a church, we must contemplate its true nature it is no less than an image of Christ. And if an image of Christ, then an image of the Christian himself for we are other Christs *"in whom the Divinity dwells bodily"* (Colossians 2:9). This revelation or theophany occurs during the solemn Consecration of a Church.

The rite begins with a threefold procession around the church with the relics that will be enshrined within the altar. Why relics? Because these are the earthly remains of fellow Christians who have been so perfectly transformed into mirrors of God's glory that even their flesh remains suffused with the Divine Energies. The bishop prays:

*May You be blessed forever, O God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who through the veil of His flesh consecrated for us an entrance into the Church of the First-born, who are written in heaven... look upon us Your sinful and unworthy servants who now celebrate the consecration of this honorable church to be a symbol of Your most holy Church, that is, of our own body which You have willed to be called Your temple and members (limbs) of Your Christ.*

Reciting Psalm 132 (LXX) the bishop anoints the altar:

*"Behold, how good and joyful it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like precious ointment poured upon the head, running down Aaron's beard, down to the hem of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hennon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life evermore."*

The service reenacts on the altar and church building a rite similar to the baptism and chrismation of a Christian. Clearly the Church is to be a model of what it means to lead the Christian life – both are to be filled with prayer and sacrifice, offering and bless-

ing, peace and communion, mercy and truth, joy and love.

The ceremony revolves around hallowing the altar table – into whose central pillar the holy relics are cemented with sacramental wax, even as we are called into intimate fellowship with all the saints in Christ. The altar is then baptized – that is, washed with rose water three times; finally it is chrismated so as to become “a throne of glory, and the dwelling place of God.”

The bishop proceeds through the church anointing the four walls “symbolizing the sanctification of all humanity by Christ's Grace.” as Symeon of Thessalonika writes.

Nothing remains but to consummate the mystery by serving the Divine Eucharistic Liturgy. Space and time melt away and we, the faithful, behold the ineffable beauty of the Face of Christ. Transfigured ourselves, we go forth into the world revealing by our presence that God dwells among us. As St. Peter writes:

*“Now that you have tasted that the Lord is good, you come to Him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual dwelling to be... 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.”*

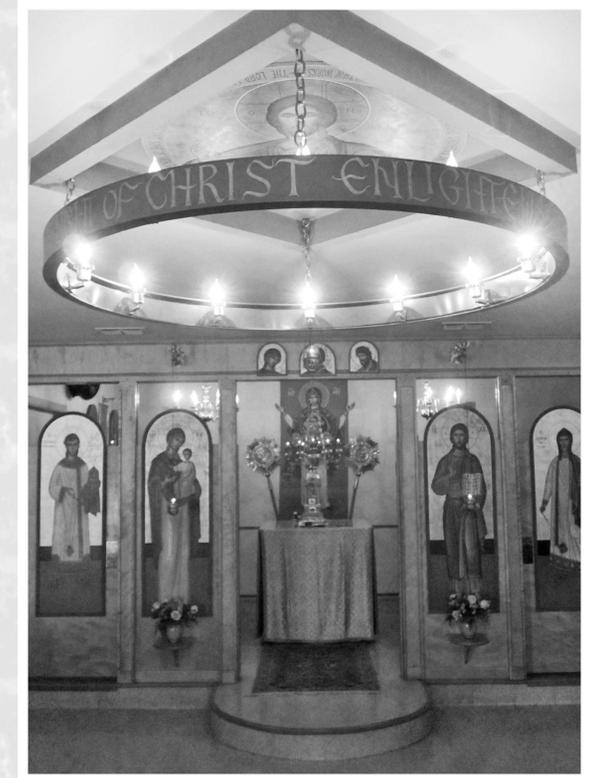
(1 Peter 2:4-5,9)

You have made of the Church a resplendent heaven, enlightening all the faithful; wherefore we stand in the midst of this holy dwelling place and we cry out to You: “Make firm this house, O Lord!”

When the Word came to us in the flesh, the Son of Thunder, writing, says: “We have seen with brightness the glory which the Son had from the Father, full of grace and truth. And to as many of us as have received Him in faith He gave the power to become children of God.” Being born again, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but having been sustained by the Holy Spirit, we have raised up a house of prayer and we cry out: “Make firm this house, O Lord!”

*Kondakion and Ikos, Dedication of a Church*

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