

Tridentine Community News

November 19, 2006

Church Architectural Terminology

Reading Catholic publications, you have no doubt run across terminology describing the various architectural features of a church. While Catholics don't seem to use as many obscure names as our Anglican brethren (A Catholic church basement is just that...a basement, not an "undercroft"), we do make use of some terms that don't conjure up immediate mental images. Today's column will demystify those infrequently used words.

This discussion assumes that a given church is arranged in traditional cruciform layout, as urged by St. Charles Borromeo in his 1577 text *Instrucciónes Fábricæ et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticæ*. While many of these same terms apply to modern churches of the fan-shape or in-the-round style, they do not carry quite the same distinction as in the classical design, where every area has a distinct purpose.

Roughly going from front (altar area) to back (entrance doors) of a church, one sees the following:

The sanctuary is the area where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass takes place. The altar, of course, is the principal architectural element there. Traditionally separated from the nave by a communion rail, the sanctuary is usually raised to a higher level than the rest of the church.

The apse is the name for the projecting, and often semicircular, part of the church which usually incorporates the sanctuary.

The sacristy is the room or set of rooms adjacent to or behind the sanctuary where the supplies and vestments are kept.

The reredos is the decorative wall that is attached to certain high altars, as at St. Josaphat. This feature is also sometimes called an "altar screen", especially in the American Southwest.

A baldachin, or baldachino, is the tent-like structure built over some high altars. St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican; the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC; St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City; and the "New" Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis are among the best-known churches whose high altars are surmounted by baldachinos. Although some churches, such as Detroit's St. Matthew, had theirs tragically removed, it is interesting to note that baldachins are coming back into fashion as a part of new, more classically-oriented church designs. In fact, one could argue that a baldachin over a freestanding altar gives that altar some of the liturgical *grávitás* that a traditional against-the-wall altar has, as it emphasizes the sacredness of what occurs underneath.

An ambulatory is the passageway behind and around the sanctuary in larger cathedrals and churches, often containing small chapels.

The choir is the seating area in or in front of the sanctuary, consisting of rows of seating facing one another. It derives its name from the Liturgical Choir of priests or religious facing one another as they chant the Mass and Divine Office. It is not to be confused with the organ loft where the (mostly lay) musical choir resides. Choirs are primarily seen in larger churches and religious house chapels. Those who sit there are said to be "*in choro*".

The chancel refers to the part of the church containing the sanctuary and choir.

The transepts are the left and right cross-members of the body of the church, corresponding in position to the cross-members of the Cross of Calvary. Usually located in front of the altar rail, they are places for shrines, side altars, baptisteries, confessionals, and sometimes side entrances.

The nave is the main body of a church where the congregation and pews reside.

The clerestory (pronounced CLEAR-story) is the upper part of the chancel, transepts, and nave, containing windows.

The narthex is the area behind the last pew, but before the vestibule. Sometimes the term is used to refer to the vestibule itself, as it technically refers to an entry hall leading into a nave.

Capitals are the decorative flourishes at or near the top of pillars. St. Josaphat's capitals are in the midst of restoration

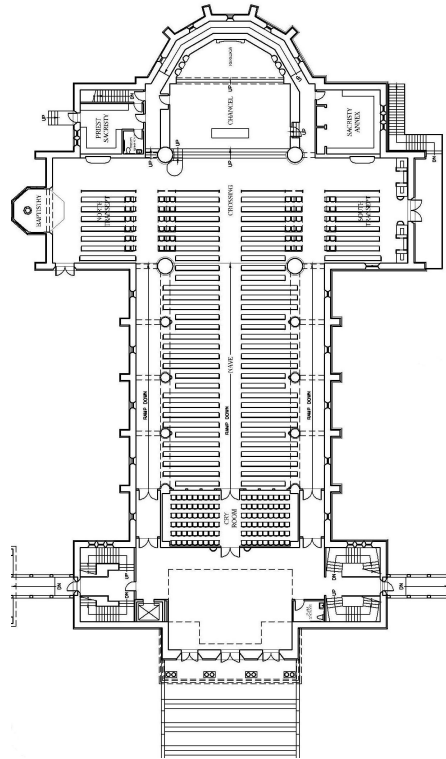
from their dull appearance to the original bright gold.

Vaults are the arches and domed ceiling niches one finds in Gothic and Romanesque churches.

A buttress is a supporting structure built against a wall. The oddly named "flying buttress" is one that is separate from the main church building, and linked to it via arches.

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ST. CHARLES BORROMEO CHURCH
FIRST FLOOR PLAN
ARCHITECT: 1785
RENDERING: 2006