

THE CONQUEST OF SPACE:  
Sacred Space at Holy Trinity Russian  
Orthodox Cathedral  
Chicago, Illinois

Frederick S. West

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, writing in his *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, describes the Eucharist of the Orthodox Church as a conquest of time.

The Eucharist is the actualization of one, single, unrepeatable event and the essence of the Sacrament consists first of all in the possibility of the conquest of time, i.e. the manifestation of a realization (within the Sacrament) of a past event in all its supra-temporal, eternal reality and effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>

In the same way, the space in which the sacrament is celebrated may be conquered and not merely organized. The Holy Trinity Cathedral of Chicago, Illinois, reveals such a conquest. Patterns of behavior and use of space, which reflect an attitude toward the holy, are clearly observable at Holy Trinity. These patterns fit the description of sacred space as perceived by *homo religiosus* which Mircea Eliade has developed. Just as *homo religiosus* organized his "world" around a theophany, so is the Holy Trinity Cathedral a space organized by the holy which breaks into it.

The building itself is of note for being a cultural artifact of ethnic, turn-of-the-century Chicago (it was built by money from Czar Nicholas II and the McCormack family) and an architectural jewel, designed by Louis Sullivan of the Chicago or Prairie School of architecture. The building follows the "octagon-domed" type of

\*A paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, held in St. Louis, Missouri, October 28, 1976.

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Faith Press, London, 1966), p. 35.

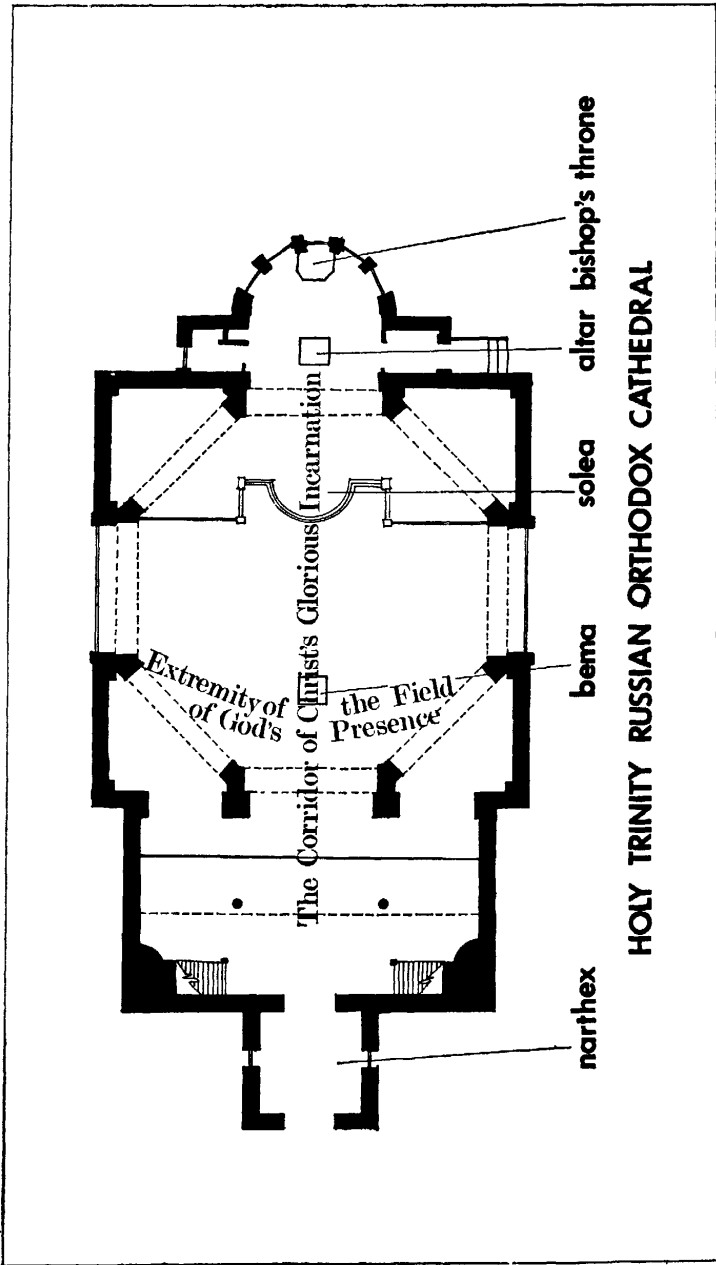
Byzantine architecture, which is a cube surmounted by an octagon and topped by a dome. The sanctuary is a rectangular space attached to the easterly end.<sup>2</sup>

The interior of the church is most striking for its feeling of height and for the elaborate, luxurious decorations. Typically, the walls are covered with murals of saints and scenes depicting the life of Christ. The floor of the nave is not occupied by pews so that the people stand during services. On the floor of the nave, just to the west of the apex of the dome, is a *bema* for the bishop. The right side of the nave is dominated by decorations of Christ (the tomb, a large crucifix and icons) and the left is dominated by objects venerating the Mother of God. The most venerated icon of the cathedral is a prominent one of Mary holding the Christ-child. The eastern end of the nave has an *ambo* or platform, raised three steps above the rest of the nave, upon which the iconostasis sits. Behind the iconostasis is the prothesis room, the sanctuary with the altar in it and the *diakonikon*. This *ambo* has a semi-circular extension directly in front of the Royal Doors. From this extension, to the door of the cathedral on an east-west axis, two metal strips are layed on the floor as far apart as the bishop's *bema* is wide. Within these strips is a mottled red and black rug. Outside of them is a mottled red rug.

This space is used for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. It is not the place here to describe or discuss the mechanics of the Liturgy. Our inquiry rather has to do with how the Liturgy, and the space which it uses, is perceived by the laity. The clergy, given their training, tended to describe the space in theological categories and with tradition mystagogical descriptions rather than out of their own experience. To get at the laity's understanding we used informed participant observation, supplemented by a questionnaire. The questionnaire was structured by our observation and as such served to verify and enrich our observations.

The lay perception of the space is revealed by where they stand during the Divine Liturgy. During the Divine Liturgy on Sunday (in contrast to feast days when the church is crowded), individuals feel comfortable standing no further forward than a semi-circle located approximately five feet inside of the western three sectors of the octagon. Individuals also do not stand on the piece of rug between the two metal strips. Thus the areas used by the congregation are the eso-narthex, on either side of the metal strips and the western part of the nave, no further forward than the semi-circle. The bulk of the

<sup>2</sup>Theodore Turak, "A Celt Among Slavs: Louis Sullivan's Holy Trinity Cathedral," *Prairie School Review* (Fourth Quarter, 1972).



congregation stands in the eso-narthex between the pillars and the outside walls.

When individuals do go into the semi-circle — to venerate icons, to receive the Eucharist and to venerate the cross — they often do so with a particular carriage: hands folded before them, eyes down, shoulders slightly bent. Sometimes they prostrate themselves or bow. It is clear that the semi-circle is special and entering it requires a particular attitude, both mental and physical.

The rug between the metal strips is part of the east-west axis of the church which extends from the bishop's chair, through the altar and the Royal Doors, across the nave to the western door. It has profound liturgical significance. The only major liturgical action that does not happen along this line is censuring. Every other major liturgical action occurs along this line or comes into this line. The Small Entrance comes out of the north door of the iconostasis and then into the east-west axis. The epistles and Gospel are read on the axis. The homily is preached on the axis. The Great Entrance comes into this line. The altar is on this axis and thus the eucharistic service is performed on it. Communion is given on the axis at the Royal Doors. The cross is venerated on the axis on the steps of the *ambo*. In addition to these liturgical actions, numerous prayers, litanies and supplications are made along the axis. This is a place of peculiar liturgical importance and its sacrality is again revealed by the actions of the laity. The laity customarily stand on this axis only at three points during the service: to receive the Eucharist, to bow and cross themselves after receiving the Eucharist, and to venerate the cross.

The lines we have described, which demark greater and lesser sacrality, are a semi-circle intersected by a line or more precisely a corridor. Both the corridor, containing liturgical action, and the semi-circle are organized by the altar. The altar seems to emanate a force. Indeed, the altar has long been experienced as "the throne of Christ" in the Byzantine liturgical tradition. To give only one example:

... the entire church building is centered around the *altar table*. The altar table does not merely symbolize the table of the last supper. It is the symbolic and mystical presence of the heavenly throne and table of the Kingdom of God.

The Book of Gospels is perpetually enthroned on the altar table. It is on the altar table that we offer the "bloodless sacrifice" of Christ to the Father. And from the altar table we receive the Bread of Life, the Body and Blood of the

Lord's Passover Supper. This table is "*the table of God's Kingdom.*" (Luke 28:30)<sup>3</sup>

The force emanating from the altar is experienced with potent directness immediately in front of it, on the east-west axis. It is experienced as a field of force, moving like ripples in a pond, in the remainder of the nave.

The east-west axis in Holy Trinity, extending from the bishop's chair to the westerly door and partially defined by metal strips in the rugs, is a *corridor of Christ's glorious incarnation*. It is here that one stands most directly in the presence of Christ and thus it is at once the most potent and the most awesome place in the church. To quote: "Only he who bears within himself the living Christ can approach His throne without being annihilated by that glory before which the purest spiritual powers prostrate themselves in joyful trembling."<sup>4</sup> Thus it is that all liturgical actions come into this corridor so that the things of the world may be sacramentalized. This is the function of the entrances. The Gospel and the bread and the wine are brought out of the north door in a journey through the "world" and into the presence of Christ, who brings out their true reality as incarnation of the Word. And so it is also that the laity only enter the corridor at times of divine-human contact: the Eucharist and veneration of the Cross.

Although God is most present in the corridor of Christ's glorious incarnation, he is hardly absent from the remainder of the church. This presence is experienced by the laity as a field of force radiating out from the altar and thus organizing the people into a semi-circle. This semi-circle is formed on the margins of the *field of God's presence*.

We see here degrees of sacrality. The sanctuary is the most sacred, with the altar at its center. The corridor is next in potency, as the place where one stands in Christ's presence. The power of the altar lessens as it radiates God's presence into the nave, just as a magnet creates a diminishing field of force around itself. This perception of the power of the holy is reflected in the symbolic descriptions of Orthodox churches given since the seventh century. In all of these descriptions, the sacredness progressively increases from the narthex to the sanctuary. In the Byzantine examples, the

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith: Worship* (Department of Religious Education, The Orthodox Church of America, New York, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Aleksei Khomiakov, "On the Western Confessions of Faith," in *Ultimate Questions*, Alexander Schmemmann, ed. (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1965), p. 53.

nave is always related to heaven. This reflects the religious beliefs of the time, when the church building was considered to be the locus of the sacred on earth.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary descriptions no longer describe the nave as heaven, but rather the narthex is "world," and the nave is "church." "Heaven" is now located solely in the sanctuary, where the altar sits as the throne of Christ. One old lady at Holy Trinity shared with me a folk saying that points to this progression: "When you turn your back to the altar, you put your back to God and your face to the devil."<sup>6</sup>

At the Holy Trinity Cathedral we see the church assembled in the world, as the church, around the field of the presence of God. If this field is peopled by anyone, it is peopled by the saints who reflect the love of Christ as fully as a human being can. Only those few who commune on any given Sunday actually go to the gates of Heaven, the Royal Doors, which open onto the throne of Christ.

Clearly the most potent and sacred location in all the cathedral is immediately before the Royal Doors. This is the point where all the sacred forces are focused.<sup>7</sup> Not only do the human and the divine meet here horizontally through the Royal Doors, but also they meet vertically as represented by the iconostasis. The iconostasis as a whole is a symbol of the meeting of the human and the divine in the vertical dimension, the incarnation of God and the theosis of man.<sup>8</sup> The Royal Doors make explicit the horizontal meeting of Christ and man through the symbols of communication of the Word which decorate the doors: the Evangelists, the Annunciation and, just above the doors, the Last Supper.

The results of our questionnaire substantially supported this understanding of the liturgical space at the cathedral. Without going into great detail, the main purpose of the questionnaire was to find out what emotional values lay persons ascribed to those locations which we observed to have different use-values. We found that what the laity felt "during the Divine Liturgy," "while venerating icons"

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, p. 89.

<sup>6</sup> Ancient examples of this understanding of church space are to be found in Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople and St. Simeon of Thessalonica. Less familiar may be some modern versions. Examples may be found in "Reinterpreting an Ancient Liturgy," *Progressive Architecture* 47 (1966), pp. 140-145; Alexander Turner, "The Church Architectural and Sacramental," *Orthodoxy* (1967), pp. 72 and 75; and Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith: Worship*, pp. 4 and 6.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Eliade *The Sacred and The Profane* (Harcourt, Brace, Inc., New York, 1959), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Boston Book and Art Shop, Boston, 1952), p. 60.

and "when receiving the Eucharist" corroborated and expanded our observations. Of course, these three categories refer to three distinct locations: outside the "field," within the "field" and within the "corridor," respectively.

While observing the Divine Liturgy, the respondents feel acted upon and passive. Something happens to make them feel "peaceful," "happy," "holy," "worshipful" and "prayerful." There is also a sense that the church is separate from the world. In contrast to this, the positions while venerating icons and receiving the Eucharist reflect much more active participation. The feeling experienced while venerating icons is one of closeness to God or communication with God, either directly or through the icons. There is also the theme of thankfulness, which can be considered communication. Accompanying these actions are intense feelings: "inspired," "need it," "elated" and "uncomfortable." This is clearly a more active and intense position than that of simply observing the Divine Liturgy.

At the Royal Doors, our respondents experience themselves in the presence of the holy. They again express intense emotion and a feeling of closeness and communion with God, as with venerating icons. But we also find that descriptive language which particularly describes an encounter with the holy. This place is "different" and "special," and co-existent are the feelings of humility ("heavy," "unworthy," "small") and glory ("forgiven," "clean," "righteous").

The questionnaire demonstrated nothing new. However, the results substantially corroborate the description of sacred space that we have observed and developed. The most important findings are:

1. the active/passive contrast within and without the semi-circle which we have described as the field of God's presence;
2. the increasingly intense and active feelings experienced as one moves toward the front of the nave, i.e. toward the altar; and
3. the descriptive language which expresses being in the presence of the holy that we find used to describe communion at the Royal Doors.

The responses to the questionnaire do not reveal any obvious difference between the corridor and the remainder of the church. This does not disprove the existence of the corridor, respect for which is so clearly observable during the Divine Liturgy.

We can now present a description of the sacred space in the Holy Trinity Cathedral. The sanctuary is heaven, where the Lord is

most present. He is present there as Christ on His throne, the altar, in the worldly forms of the Gospels and the bread and wine. God's incarnated presence is felt most powerfully directly in front of the altar, in the corridor of glorious incarnation. The point of greatest divine-human communication is precisely in front of the Royal Doors, before the altar and at the iconostasis. This is a awesome place and only one penitent and prepared can come before Christ's glorious throne and survive.

The line (corridor) and semi-circle by which we have schematized the sacred space at Holy Trinity cathedral reflect a repeated theme in Christian architecture: centered axiality. The two architectural forms available to the Christian church after the Edict of Milan were the basilica and the *heroon*. The basilica, popular for civic use and singularly axial, was suitable for processions but unsuitable for emphasizing a particular locus as more sacred, i.e. the altar. The *heroon* or circular, centered building, was used for tombs or temples. This form emphasized a single locus, but did not allow for the processions of early church liturgy. The architectural problem was how to combine the qualities of these two buildings, so that the space could both accommodate processions and emphasize a particular locale. For the Byzantine world the problem was solved monumentally with the construction of Hagia Sophia.<sup>9</sup> For Holy Trinity it was solved gracefully and skillfully so that the sacred space organized by the liturgy is coincidental with the architectural space designed by Sullivan.

With this understanding of sacred space at Holy Trinity, we can now turn to the understanding of sacred space developed by Mircea Eliade and make an instructive comparison. Sacred space for the primitive is the only *real* space, as contrasted to the non-reality of the surrounding space.<sup>10</sup> This space is a specific, defined point or place where the world has been "founded." It is the center of the world, having absolute reality. It is absolute reality because it is a point of divine communication, "a break through from plane to plane—either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead) . . ."

. . . Here, then we have a sequence of religious conceptions and cosmological images that are inseparably connected and form a system that may be called the "system of the world" prevalent in traditional societies.

<sup>9</sup> William MacDonald, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (George Braziller, New York, 1967), pp. 11-17.

<sup>10</sup> Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-22.



- a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space;
- b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven and earth and vice versa from earth to the underworld);
- c) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the axis mundi: pillar, ladder, mountain, tree, vine, etc.;
- d) around the cosmic axis lies the world (our world) hence the axis is located "in the middle" at the "navel of the earth," it is the Center of the World.<sup>11</sup>

Sacred space in the Holy Trinity Cathedral is not a primitive phenomenon. The sense of "absolute reality" of sacred space, over against the "non-reality" of surrounding space, has weakened. We live with a secular mind-set and are hesitant to claim radical discontinuities in space. Yet there are discontinuities of some kind, as we have seen in the cathedral.

Looking at the "system of the world" described by Eliade the parallels in the cathedral are striking. There is no doubt that (a) a "break in the homogeneity of space" is experienced in the cathedral. The opening (b), which in primitive temples is often an opening in the roof to heaven, is present in the cathedral as the Royal Doors. They are the point of communication between the human and the divine. Schmemmann describes the Eucharist, taken at the Royal Doors.

The Eucharist of Christ and Christ the Eucharist is the "breakthrough" that brings us to the table in the Kingdom, raises us to heaven, makes us partaker of divine food.<sup>12</sup>

The "communication with heaven" (c) is expressed in the symbol of the iconostasis. It reflects the meeting of the divine and the human which is peculiar to Orthodoxy: both come to meet the other, the divine through incarnation and the human through theosis. The point before the Royal Doors is the most potent in the church and it is an analogue to the "Center of the World" (d) described by Eliade. It is at this point that one's own life is sacramentalized in the Eucharist.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (National Student Christian Federation, New York, 1963), p. 24.

And it is at this point that the world is more "real."<sup>13</sup> Again, quoting Schmemmann,

We had to ascend to heaven in Christ to see and to understand the Creation in its real being as glorification of God, as that *response* to divine love in which alone Creation becomes what God wants it to be, thanksgiving, eucharist, adoration.<sup>14</sup>

Sacred space at Holy Trinity Cathedral is dynamic, potent and sacramental. It reveals to the people the presence of the holy and organizes them for worship. It is a space conquered by God, revealing Himself incarnated in this world.

<sup>13</sup> Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, p. 20.



Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.