

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Catholics use their parish church for public worship and personal prayer.
- Every place and object in a church building has special significance.
- When we gather in church, Christ is in our midst.



• Describe a place that's sacred or holy to you.

• To what or to whom is your local parish dedicated? How does the parish share that event or person's story?



Although each church is unique, we expect to find certain things in all of them. The following will help you understand some key symbols and objects you'll find in a Catholic church building.

Places in a Catholic Church

Where do you feel a strong presence of God? Maybe you think of a forest, a mountain, or the ocean. Perhaps a place where you felt safe and loved as a child comes to mind. God is everywhere, but certain places help us feel his presence more profoundly. Catholics encounter God in many places. In fact, you've likely already visited a place Catholics believe "exists solely for the good of souls" (Pope Paul VI, *Christus Dominus*, 31).

That place is the local **parish**. The term parish can refer to the community and to the buildings used by the community, just as the term church can refer to the faith community and to the building where Catholics gather to pray.

Most parishes have territorial boundaries and serve the people of the local area. Some parishes aren't territorial but serve specific groups with particular nationalities, languages, or rites. A parish may be named to honor a person of the Trinity, a saint, or a significant event in the life of Jesus or Mary.

The Sanctuary: Front and Center

The **sanctuary** (1) is the main area of focus for liturgical ceremonies. In this area, you'll find the main **altar** (2) or Lord's table, which is the focus of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the offerings of bread and wine brought to this altar become the Body and Blood of Christ. At the altar, the priest reads from the **Roman Missal** (3), the book of prayers used at Mass. Candles adorn the altar to symbolize Christ's presence and light.

Often to one side of the altar is the **ambo** (4). You'll find the Lectionary, the book of Mass readings, here. What happens here is the focus of the Liturgy of the Word. Nonscriptural reading and song leading may occur at a secondary **lectern** (5).

A cross or **crucifix** (6)—a cross containing the image of Christ's body—reminds us of his suffering and death. You'll find one placed either on or near the altar. It may be used in procession at the beginning and end of Mass.

The **tabernacle** (7) is a special receptacle in which the eucharistic bread is reserved for the purpose of bringing Communion to the sick and for private devotion. The **sanctuary lamp** (8), often red in color, houses a candle that continuously burns near the tabernacle to remind us of Jesus' presence there. The tabernacle may be in the main space of the church or in a separate room or space nearby.

Do Catholics Worship Images?

The crucifix is a symbol that reminds us of the salvation won through Christ's death and resurrection. Images of Christ remind us of St. Paul's mandate to "proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Catholics don't worship the images of Jesus or the saints found in Catholic churches and homes. God alone is worthy of our worship. These images in statues, stained-glass windows, paintings, and mosaics are just visible representations of spiritual realities. Through them, we grow in appreciation for and union with what they represent—the living and divine person of Christ and the saints in heaven.

Other Places in Church

1. Most parishes have a **narthex** or **gathering space** that divides the main entrance from the nave, the people's worship area. The narthex may feature pamphlet racks or bulletin boards and be used for fellowship before and after Mass. It also functions as a starting place for processions, certain rites, and to transition between the liturgy and everyday life.
2. When you walk into church, you'll see a small bowl of water. This is a font containing **holy water** (9) that has been blessed by a priest to be used as a reminder of baptism. The faithful dip the tips of their fingers into the water and make the Sign of the Cross as they enter and leave the church.
3. The **baptismal font** (10) is a large, raised vessel or basin in which holy water is contained for baptisms. It's found in a prominent place, either near the entrance of the church or in the sanctuary. In churches where baptism by immersion is performed, the font may be a larger pool. When placed near the main entrance, a baptismal font may also serve as the holy water font.

Things and places in the Catholic church



1. Sanctuary
2. Altar
3. Roman Missal
4. Ambo
5. Holy water
6. Baptismal font
7. Easter (paschal) candle
8. Stations of the Cross
9. Reconciliation chapel
10. Confessional
11. Tabernacle

4. The **Easter** (or **paschal**) **candle** (11) is a large, ornamented candle symbolic of the risen Christ and often positioned near the altar, lectern, or baptismal font. During the Easter season, it burns at every liturgy. It's also placed next to the casket during funerals as a sign of our hope in the resurrection and of our faith that Christ will receive the departed into the fullness of his kingdom.
5. The **Stations of the Cross** (12) (also **Way of the Cross**) are fourteen crosses or images representing or depicting the steps Jesus took to his death. They are usually located along the inside walls of the church. Catholics use them to meditate on Christ's suffering.
6. The **reconciliation chapel**, sometimes called the confessional or reconciliation room, is a private space where a person celebrates the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. Most of these provide for confessions to be made anonymously (behind a screen) or face to face with the priest.

• How does it feel to know that your baptismal or confirmation candle will be lit by the Easter candle, spiritually joining you to Christ?





1. Stations of the Cross 2. Altar 3. Tabernacle 4. Ambo 5. Sanctuary lamp 6. Crucifix 7. Tabernacle 8. Sanctuary lamp 9. Baptismal font 10. Ambo 11. Sanctuary lamp 12. Stations of the Cross 13. Sacristy

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

Clerical Vestments

The **sacristy** (13) is the room where the priest and ministers prepare for liturgical services and put on their religious garments called **vestments**. The main vestments worn at Mass are:

1. An **alb**: a long, white garment symbolic of the purity one should have when approaching God. Priests, deacons, and altar servers wear albs.
2. A **cincture**: a belt or cord, often white, worn around the waist over the alb.
3. A **chasuble**: the outermost garment worn by the priest during Mass. The color of the chasuble matches the liturgical season or feast. Deacons may wear a similar but shorter garment called a **dalmatic**.
4. A **stole**: a narrow, fabric band that's worn around the neck by priests and bishops. A deacon wears a stole over his left shoulder like a sash.

- How does what you wear to church symbolize the way you feel about God?



Also on the Parish Campus

Outside of church, parish activities may be held in a gym, cafeteria, hall, or parish center. The **rectory** is where the priest or priests reside. If a religious institute is associated with your parish or nearby, its members may live in a communal home. These homes go by various names: **convent**, **monastery**, **cloister**, **friary**, or **abbey**.

Types of Churches

A **diocese** is a geographical area entrusted to the pastoral care of a **bishop**. Examples of dioceses in the United States are Albany and Baton Rouge. A large or significant diocese is called an **archdiocese**, which is led by an **archbishop**. Three U.S. archdioceses are St. Louis, Chicago, and Los Angeles. A diocese or archdiocese may be subdivided into **deaneries** consisting of several parishes, and all are divided into parishes. The (arch) bishop's offices and programs are centralized in the **chancery**, sometimes called the diocesan curia or Catholic Center.

A **cathedral** is the (arch)bishop's official parish church. The Latin word cathedra means "chair," which is the symbol of the bishop's leadership. The pope's cathedral is the Basilica of St. John Lateran. A **basilica** is a church designated as a place of special historical or architectural (artistic) importance. As the traditional "home parish" of the pope, the Lateran Basilica is considered more important than any other church, even St. Peter's in Vatican City.

The **Vatican** is the worldwide administrative headquarters of the Catholic Church and the pope's official residence.

- In what (arch)diocese is your parish located? What is the name and location of the cathedral?



Other Religious Places

In Old Testament times, the Israelites went on pilgrimage—a journey to a sacred place—to the Temple in Jerusalem. Here they could worship, pray, and encounter God in a deeper way. The Holy Land is another popular destination for both Jews and Christians today. Pilgrims sail on the Sea of Galilee and visit places where Jesus and the apostles lived, taught, healed, and nurtured the growth of early Christian communities.

Catholics also visit **shrines**. A shrine may be where a holy object—statue, image, or relic—is housed. It may also be the location of a saint's life or burial, a miracle, or an appearance of the Blessed Virgin Mary.



Think of all the Catholic symbols, objects, and places you know so far. Pick one that represents your journey of faith. Explain your choice in your prayer journal.

- If you could make a pilgrimage to anywhere in the world, where would it be? Why?



Journey of Faith for Adults: Inquiry. Q11 (826252)

Imprimi Potest: Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSSR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists.

Imprimatur: "In accordance with CIC 827, permission to publish has been granted on March 7, 2016, by the Most Reverend Edward M. Rice, Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of St. Louis. Permission to publish is an indication that nothing contrary to Church teaching is contained in this work. It does not imply any endorsement of the opinions expressed in the publication; nor is any liability assumed by this permission."

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Third Edition. Printed in the United States of America.
20 19 18 17 16 / 5 4 3 2 1. Third Edition.