NARTHEX VS. NAPE

The first noticeable feature when you walk into just about any Catholic Church is that you don’t walk into the room where the Mass happens, called the nave; first, you walk into the narthex. The word “narthex” comes from a Greek word meaning “giant funnel.” Our main narthex (on the southeast side of the Church, facing DFW airport) is even shaped like a funnel, with the wide “mouth” at the southeast glass doors tapering down to the “spout” at the doors to the nave, at the back of the Church. It is meant to be a place where the faithful gather and prepare to enter the nave for Mass. The narthex, meant to be a more social gathering space, also serves as a physical connection between the outside world and the sacred worship space, the nave.

INTRO TO CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

“I rejoiced when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”
– Psalm 122:1 –

What makes a Church different than other kinds of buildings? Why do sacred buildings – regardless of faith tradition, but particularly within the Catholic tradition – look different than secular buildings?

There’s a saying in the Catholic Church – lex orandi, lex credendi – the law of prayer is the law of belief. In other words, the Church believes what it prays and prays what it believes. Our prayer, from the words to the actions and even the external trappings and ornamentations, all express our belief. Everything in a Church is designed to put us into contact with God and draw us deeper into prayer and worship. When we step into a Church, we are stepping into the house of God and experiencing a foretaste of life in Heaven. Everything in a Catholic Church is meant to direct our hearts and minds towards that reality. Churches look and feel different than secular buildings because of the sacredness of what happens within them.

Church architecture is meant to inform our worship – the design of the visible, physical building helps us to understand the invisible, spiritual realities going on around us. If you know how to “read the signs” of Sacred Architecture, it can vastly deepen your understanding of what is being prayed, and thus what is believed.

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When we enter the narthex from outside, we should begin preparing our hearts and minds to enter the most sacred part of our week and the holiest place on the planet, the nave, where Heaven and Earth meet in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The word “nave” comes from a Latin word meaning “ship,” calling to mind, among other things, the ark of Noah being a refuge from the floods and storms of the world around them, and the inner hold of the fishing boat where Peter found Jesus asleep during the storm at sea. The nave, for us, represents the Church, our spiritual Mother, and the vessel which safely guides us to our true home, the Kingdom of Heaven. The nave should be treated as a place of quiet, prayerful reverence; out of respect and reverence to this prayerful space, and to give your brothers and sisters in Christ a place to pray and encounter Jesus in peace, conversations should be held outside of the nave.

**DESIGN AND ART**

*In the earthly Liturgy, the Church participates, by a foretaste, in that heavenly Liturgy… By venerating the memory of the Saints, she hopes one day to have some part and fellowship with them. Thus, images of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Saints, in accordance with the Church’s most ancient tradition, should be displayed for veneration by the faithful in sacred buildings and should be arranged so as to usher the faithful toward the mysteries of faith celebrated there.*

*General Instruction on the Roman Missal, 318*

In the Franciscan tradition, members of the Franciscan community – friars, nuns, and lay people – strive to imitate Jesus the way that St. Francis of Assisi did, taking a note from St. Paul who said “be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). In our renovations here at St. Francis, we wanted to lean into that Franciscan tradition. That’s why our sanctuary features events from the life of St. Francis so prominently; meditating on his life can help us be better disciples of Jesus.
The image on the left depicts St. Francis meeting St. Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers, otherwise known as the Dominicans. Francis and Dominic were contemporaries and encouraged each other in their ministries. Above this mural, the Latin transcription “Pax et Bonum” translates to “peace and all goodness,” a traditional Franciscan greeting dating back to the time of St. Francis himself.

The middle image in the sanctuary depicts St. Francis embracing the Crucified Christ, which is central to Francis’ spirituality of continual conversion, penance, and closeness to Jesus. The Latin inscription above the altar, “Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis” translates to “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us,” which, originally said by St. John the Baptist, is what is also said by the priest when he elevates the Eucharist during the Mass.

The image on the right depicts St. Francis receiving St. Clare into the Franciscan community, and thus the beginning of the first women’s community of Franciscan Sisters, the Poor Clares, a cloistered order dedicated to prayer and penance. Above this mural, the Latin transcription “Amare et Serve” translates to “to love and to serve,” which was the motto of the Poor Clares.

Sanctuaries throughout the history of the Church were typically adorned in rich color. Red, as in our sanctuary, is a symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit, charity, and spiritual renewal. The seal of the Franciscan Order, also in our parish logo and found in the floor in front of the main aisle, symbolizes the unity of Christ and his people, exemplified in St. Francis of Assisi.

The sculpture above the tabernacle depicts God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

The stations of the cross, from the original St. Francis Church in Grapevine, have been reintroduced to the nave of the Church with a new red background that brings the red of the sanctuary out into the rest of the room.

Wood carvings were created by the Albl family from Oberramergau, Germany, who come from a long line of wood carvers spanning the last 400 years.
TABERNACLE

The word “tabernacle” comes from the Latin word meaning “tent” or “dwelling,” because within this golden vessel Jesus Christ, really and truly fully present in the Eucharist, “makes his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). The red sanctuary candle reminds us of Jesus’ presence within the tabernacle. In the renovations of our sanctuary here at St. Francis, our tabernacle was moved to a central place in the sanctuary to remind us that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith (Lumen Gentium 11) and our spiritual lives and deserves a central place in our worship. Our new tabernacle was originally commissioned by Cardinal Krol, the Archbishop of Philadelphia, in the 1950’s.

SANCTUARY STEPS

There seems to be a connection throughout human history between elevated places and encounters with God. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, David and Solomon built the Temple on the mountain in Jerusalem, and both the Transfiguration and the Crucifixion of Jesus happen on a mountain. When we come to worship at Mass, the altar is typically in an elevated place, meant to symbolize humanity drawing near to God and God drawing near to humanity. In our newly renovated sanctuary, we replaced the steps so that they would be not only safer to walk up and down, but also so that the altar has its own elevated platform, further emphasizing the sacredness of the encounter which happens there. The ambo is on a step below the altar to emphasize the primacy and centrality of the Eucharistic celebration.

ALTAR

The altar is where Heaven meets Earth every time the Mass is offered. Upon this sacred table mere bread and wine, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the words of Jesus Christ at the Last Supper said by the priest, are literally changed into the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ, whose “flesh is true food and blood is true drink” (John 6:55). St. John Chrysostom, in the year 391 AD, proclaimed that we must “reverence now, oh reverence, this table of which we are all partakers!” In keeping with the Franciscan tradition, the new altar was modeled after the altar at the Upper Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy, as was the ambo, where the priest or deacon reads the Gospel and proclaims the homily.

The mosaics on the altar and ambo are traditional 12th and 13th century liturgical design. In keeping with the ancient tradition of the Mass being celebrated in the roman catacombs over the tombs of the martyrs, the altar contains a 1st class relic of St. Justin Martyr from the 2nd Century. The altar also contains a relic of Pope St. Pius X (1835–1914) and St. Anthony of Padua (1195–1231), who was received into the Franciscan Order during the lifetime of St. Francis of Assisi.

“It is an old story that while we may need somebody like Dominic to convert the heathen to Christianity; we are in even greater need of somebody like Francis, to convert the Christians to Christianity.”

– G. K. Chesterton –

Recommended Reading:

The Sacred that Surrounds Us: How Everything in a Catholic Church Points to Heaven by Andrea Zachman (Ascension Press)
Heaven in Stone and Glass by Bishop Robert Barron (The Crossroads Publishing Company)