

## **4. A Self-Guided Church Tour**

### **Introduction**

Welcome to St. Nicholas Orthodox Christian Church! We're part of the one, Holy Orthodox Church, which was established by the Lord Jesus Christ, and has continued since the time of the Apostles. While the Orthodox Church is united throughout the world, it has been historically organized by region into self-governing local churches (for example, the Orthodox Church of Russia or the Orthodox Church of Greece), which all share a common faith and life in Christ. Our church is part of the ancient Church of Antioch, established by the Apostles Peter and Paul. It was in the Church of Antioch that the term "Christian" first came to be used, according to the book of Acts (11:26).

Today, the Antiochian Church includes the Orthodox Christians of Lebanon and Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, as well as other parts of the world, including North America. Our Antiochian Archdiocese is one of several Orthodox "jurisdictions" in the US, founded by Orthodox Christians from various "old countries." We pray these jurisdictions will one day unite as a single Orthodox Church in the US, but in the meantime we are in the Antiochian Archdiocese. Our community includes folks who have converted from other traditions, as well as those from Orthodox backgrounds (Lebanese, Greek, Russian, Romanian, etc.).

### **Orthodox Church Architecture**

An Orthodox church is divided into three sections: the Narthex, the Nave, and the Holy Place (or Altar). These three parts correspond to the three parts of the Jewish Temple, as described in the Old Testament. Christian architecture has maintained this arrangement from early in the history of the Church.

### **The Narthex**

The Narthex is the outer-most part of the church building. Some churches have both an outer and an inner narthex, usually separated by a door, or set of doors. Our church has only a single narthex, which doubles as the general entry area for the building. Here the faithful make their transition from the hectic pace of the world to the rhythm of heavenly worship. They venerate icons, and may light candles, praying for loved ones or asking God's help for particular needs. The candles are made of pure beeswax, reminding us of the sweetness of life in Christ, and the flame of the candles and lamps represent the brightness of Christ, who is the "light of the world."

In our narthex there is a large icon (image) of St. Nicholas, our patron Saint. St. Nicholas is the real "Santa Claus." He was a bishop of the city of Myra in Asia Minor, in the 4th century.

Over the doors leading into the Nave of our church is the icon known as the "Hospitality of Abraham," a copy of one of the most famous icons in the world, by the famous Russian iconographer, St. Andrei Rublev. This icon depicts three Angels who appeared to Abraham and represent the three persons of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **The Nave**

There are double doors that lead from the Narthex into the Nave of the church. The Nave is where the faithful participate in the worship of the church. In traditional church buildings (as found in the "old countries") there is often very little seating. Though many Orthodox churches in the United States have pews or chairs, the most common posture for prayer in the Orthodox tradition is standing. Worship is understood to be an activity requiring our full attention and participation. The term "Nave" comes from the Greek word for "ship," or

“boat.” This name reminds us that we are on a journey through the sea of life. We might think of Noah’s ark — through the Church, God delivers us from the floods and storms of life.

### **Epitaphios**

Just inside the Nave, as you step in and look back and above to the spot over the doors, you can see the “epitaphios.” This is an embroidered cloth depicting the burial of Christ. It is brought down during Holy Week, shortly before Pascha (Easter), and is carried in procession around the church, as a remembrance of, and participation in, the events of Christ’s crucifixion and burial.

### **The Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Pascha**

The central proclamation of the Christian faith is the reality that because of God’s great love for mankind, He sent His only-begotten Son into the world, for the life of the world and its salvation. This movement of the eternal Son and Word of God into the world, as He became a human being in order to save us, is what we call the Incarnation. The incarnation of Christ makes our salvation and union with God possible. It also means that matter — all of God’s creation — can be sanctified, and restored to its original purpose as a vehicle for God’s grace to be bestowed upon mankind. This is reflected in all that you see, or perceive with your senses, in the Church’s buildings and services: icons, incense, the music of the church, the vestments worn by the clergy, even the very architecture of traditional churches.

Along with the Incarnation, the life-giving Death and Resurrection of Christ are central to our worship. Pascha (Easter) is the greatest celebration in the Church year, commemorating the Lord’s crucifixion, burial and rising again. Each Sunday is also a “little Pascha,” the day of the Resurrection. The term “Pascha” is the Greek word for “Passover.” Jesus Christ is our passover Lamb, delivering us from death. Everything in the church speaks to us of the Incarnation, of Pascha, and the magnificent love for mankind of the Holy Trinity.

### **Icons, Crosses, and Domes**

The word “icon” is simply the Greek word for “image.” In the Orthodox Church, it’s normal for there to be many icons adorning the walls, and even the ceilings. The icons depict Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, various Saints, and events from the life of Christ or the history of the Church. The earliest iconographer (icon painter) was the Apostle Luke, and icons have been part of Christian worship since the earliest days of the Church. Icons remind us of the presence of Christ and of the “great cloud of witnesses” (the Saints); they are “windows into Heaven.” They also preach and teach in a visual way, expressing the Gospel message. Icons are, above all, possible because of the incarnation of Christ, in which the invisible God became visible. They remind us that God became man out of love for us.

In traditional church architecture, there is usually a dome over the center of the nave. In the dome there is an icon of Christ, called the Pantocrator (“ruler of all”) gazing down at and blessing the worshipers below. The dome is an architectural “icon” of God’s protecting embrace. From the outside of a traditional church building, one sees a cross on top of the dome, showing that through the Cross of Christ salvation has come to us. Crosses also adorn the inside of the church.

### **Oil Lamps**

There are lamps in front of some of the icons. Traditionally, church lamps use olive oil. In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John describes “seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 1:12) bearing witness to the use of oil lamps in the Church’s worship throughout history. Olive oil was a basic medicine of the ancient Mediterranean world; the Lord mentions its use for

healing in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Thus it represents God's compassion, mercy, and healing. The Epistle of St. James mentions anointing the sick for healing, something often done in the Orthodox church.

### **Music**

As you entered the nave, you may have noticed music stands in the back of the church. This is the choir area; there is also a chanter's stand towards the front of the church, on the left. Orthodox worship involves chanting and singing, all done with the human voice, the most fitting instrument for worshiping God. We use a blend of ancient Byzantine chant and Russian-style music.

### **Bishop's Throne**

On the side of the nave opposite the chanter's stand, you see an ornate chair by itself. This is the "throne," a seat of honor for the bishop to sit in when he is visiting. In the Orthodox church we have three orders of ordained clergy: bishops (episkopi), priests (presbyters), and deacons. These are the same three orders mentioned in the book of Acts.

### **Iconostasis**

At the front of the Nave is something called the "iconostasis," meaning "icon-stand." Practically, it provides a place for icons, which remind us of the purpose of our worship, calling us to constantly remember our Lord Jesus Christ. The Saints remind us that holiness is the goal of our life. Symbolically, the iconostasis also represents the border between earth and heaven. While the other world remains mysterious to us, Christ has established a doorway from earth into heaven, by His death and resurrection. Thus, we find a central doorway through the iconostasis, with gates referred to as the "Beautiful Gates," or the "Holy Doors." These gates represent the entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

On the Holy Doors are depictions of the Annunciation (Archangel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary and telling her that she will be the Mother of Christ), and the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). The Holy Doors generally remain shut outside of services, reminding us of the fallenness of this world, which we experience since Adam and Eve were cast from Paradise. When they are opened during worship, this shows that Christ has made a way for us through death into eternal life, and that through the Church's worship, He is leading us into eternal communion with Him. In Him, though we remain in this world, we nevertheless begin to experience the Kingdom even now.

Above the Royal Doors we see the icon of the Mystical Supper. We call it "Mystical" rather than the "Last" supper, because there is nothing "last" about it. It is the ongoing reality of the Eucharist, which we celebrate every Sunday, and on many other occasions.

To the right of the Holy Doors we find a large icon of Christ. In it, Jesus is shown with His hand in the traditional form of the priestly blessing. This configuration has the fingers actually spelling the letters that stand for "Jesus Christ." The same letters are shown in the icon, "IC XC." In the Lord's left hand He holds a book, representing both the Gospel and the "Book of Life," as mentioned in the Book of Revelation. When members of the Orthodox Church confess their sins, they do so before the icon of Christ, with the priest as the confidential witness before God.

To the left of the Holy Doors is the icon of the Virgin Mary. She's referred to as the "Theotokos" or the "Mother of God" in the Orthodox Church, because she gave birth to Christ, who is God in the flesh. In fact, this icon is not simply a depiction of the Virgin Mary,

but a depiction of Christ at his first coming, while the other icon of Christ, to the right of the Holy Doors, depicts Him at His second coming. The icon of the Mystical Supper completes the set of images, by showing how Christ is present with us even now, in the “breaking of the bread,” (the Eucharist) and in the Church’s worship in general.

To the right of Christ is the icon of St. John the Baptist. This is the traditional place for his icon on the iconostasis; he is seen to be motioning towards the Lord, just as he pointed out Christ to the disciples in the Gospel, telling them, “behold the Lamb of God.” To the left of the Virgin Mary icon is another icon of St. Nicholas. This position is the traditional place for the patron saint of a church; in our case this is St. Nicholas. Other churches would have a different Saint or festal icon in this spot.

Additional icons to the right and left depict Saints who are especially significant for our community. The one all the way to the right is of St. Raphael of Brooklyn, who was from Lebanon, and came to America in 1895 as the first Arabic-speaking Orthodox clergyman in the U.S. He visited Shreveport in 1914 and gave his blessing for the founding of a church.

The “Deacons’ Doors,” are for practical use during services, when clergy and servers enter and exit the Altar area. On them you see the Archangels, Gabriel (right side) and Michael (left side). Up above, there’s a second row of smaller icons, which depict the 12 Apostles (St. Paul is included along with the Lord’s 12 disciples, minus Judas Iscariot).

### **The Holy Place (Altar), Incense, and Vestments**

The third and final portion of the church is that known as the Holy Place, or Altar. The Holy Place is treated with special reverence, and generally only the clergy and altar servers enter there. It contains the altar table, or the “Holy Table”. It also has additional tables to the left and to the right, towards the back. The one on the left is called the “Prothesis” table, and is used for preparing the bread and wine for consecration during the Liturgy. The Divine Liturgy is the Eucharistic service, which is celebrated every Sunday morning, as well as on feast days. During the Liturgy, the gifts (bread and wine) are taken in procession from the Prothesis table, out and around the nave, and back into the holy place via the Holy Doors, which are open at that time. Then they are placed on the Holy Table for the consecration.

In general, there are many processions in Orthodox worship, and they always take place in a counter-clockwise direction. We can take this to indicate that our worship is participation in the worship of Heaven, which is outside of time.

The censer, in which incense is burned, is usually kept in the Holy Place, and is used for many of the services. Incense represents the prayers of the Church, rising up to heaven, as well as the sweet, heavenly fragrance of God’s presence in our midst.

During the services, you will see the priest, the deacon, and altar servers wearing special vestments. These are reminiscent of the baptismal garments that all Orthodox Christians wear at their baptisms, as well as the “wedding garments” spoken of by the Lord in the Gospel. They remind us that we are all called to keep our baptismal garments spotless, by repenting and confessing whenever we sin. It is customary to dress nicely and modestly for the services, which is a way for the faithful to symbolize their baptismal garments, as well.

May the blessing of the Lord and His mercy be upon you!