

THE NARTHEX, THE NAVE AND THE SANCTUARY

As we, the parishioners of St. Matthias the Apostle Catholic Church of Magnolia, are preparing to build our new place of worship, it may be of interest to review how a Catholic Church is organized and the Sacred Objects which go into it. We will publish messages on these subjects in the coming weeks. Those interested in a more thorough look into these subjects might enjoy the book “The Sacred That Surrounds Us: How Everything in a Catholic Church Points to Heaven” by Andrea Zachman.

Today we will consider the Narthex and its place in the church relative to the Nave and the Sanctuary.

The Narthex is the entry hall we pass through as enter the church. The Narthex is at the opposite end of the church from the Sanctuary and helps us to prepare for the Mass as we leave the outside material world and enter the spiritual world of the Nave.

The word Narthex is Greek for “giant funnel”. In the modern Catholic Church it is the entry hall we pass through as we enter the church. It may also be referred to as vestibule or gathering space. Even though it is structurally a part of the church building, the Narthex has a separate liturgical function, to help us prepare ourselves spiritually as we enter the holy church. The Narthex is also a place where the congregation gathers for processions for special celebrations such as Palm Sunday.

One purpose of the Narthex in the earlier church was to allow those not eligible for admittance to the general congregation to hear and participate in the service. This restriction has been removed and we now allow all into the Nave for the Mass.

Early churches had an outer Narthex (the exonarthex) and an inner Narthex (the esonarthex). The esonarthex was enclosed and separated from the Nave by walls or rails or the like. The exonarthex may have been an open area in front of the church façade, delimited on all sides by a colonnade as in the first St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

The Nave is that area of the church where the parishioners gather for the celebration of the Mass. The Nave includes the pews which are arranged to focus our attention on the Sanctuary. The Nave is a holy area and includes Sacred Objects which help the parishioners bring themselves to a holy state as they enter the Nave for celebration of the Mass.

The Sanctuary is clearly distinguished from the rest of the church and is usually raised little above the level of the Nave. The Sanctuary includes the altar, the tabernacle, the ambo and the presider’s chair.

Many Sacred Objects are located in the Nave and the Sanctuary. Have you ever wondered about all the vessels, vestments and the many objects in the church? Which are sacred and which are traditional? Which are mandated by the Catholic Church and which are optional?

We will examine these questions in these messages. Next week we will discuss the Sanctuary and objects we see there during the Mass.