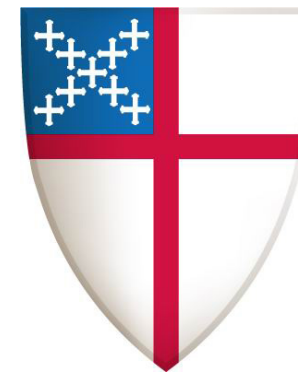




SYMBOLISM IN THE CHURCH

Symbols in the House of God



PALMER MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH

6221 Main Street | Houston, Texas 77030

713.529.6196 | PalmerChurch.org



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SYMBOLS IN THE HOUSE OF GOD

Welcome All!

In hoping to share both the faith that enlivens and thrills us, as well as to invite you to be engaged by the experience of walking into Palmer Church, let us begin our exploration at the front door.

The suggestions, hints, and history associated with some of the symbols of Palmer Church in specific and the Episcopal Practice in general is our focus. We Episcopalians refer to this body of knowledge and praxis as culture.

Come up the steps to the Church building, just a few feet away from Main Street. As one comes through the heavy wooden doors from outside, one enters another world.

Doors

Please note these doors are substantial. This space and its place of history in the making is significant and thus the doors symbolize that this is an experience you are entering, not business as usual, not entertainment, but a culture that has been on this planet for 2000 years. The heavy and authoritative doors are a clue to “get ready” for there is so much more ahead. It is a bit of effort to pull one of these massive Palmer doors open or closed. Rather than unfriendly in meaning, this place is much, much larger than you perhaps are currently thinking. Here friendship abounds in faith and sharing. Be welcomed, for 2000 years of culture is a daunting body of culture to encounter.

The Narthex

When we come into Palmer Church, we are standing in the **narthex**. This is a foyer or greeting area. You will notice a small column of marble that holds some water by the entrance into the church. This water has been blessed by a priest, thus setting it apart for special use. That use is the sacramental cleansing or refreshment of the worshiper. Holy Water is kept in a font or a stoup or an aspersorium. Many devout persons from across the Church Universal know and use this symbol to remind themselves that they are entering a new domain and that they need to adjust to this greater reality. Most often the custom followed is to dip one's fingers into the Holy Water and then make the sign of the cross. This cross covers from forehead to chest and right to left across to shoulders. One may also say, “In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Spirit. Amen.”

At certain points of Theological Intensity one may hear bells. You are not just hearing things. The Sanctus bells point out in expression the High Points and high drama in the Liturgy. Many persons bow at the sound of the bells not because they worship the bells but because they worship Jesus as The Christ and the words that the bells punctuate (point out) are the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper.

The Aumbry

Behind the altar is yet another level of architecture. This piece of liturgical form is called the aumbry. In the Middle Ages an **aumbry** was a cabinet in the wall of a Christian church or in the sacristy which was used to store chalices and other sacred vessels, as well as for the reserved sacrament, the consecrated elements from the Holy Eucharist. The aumbry is set into a larger setting called the reredos, or raredos. This piece may be stone or wood. Ours is carved and painted with symbols for the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and the Trinity (Triangle).

The Connections to the Past and Future

The history of worship spaces is intricate and specific. Episcopalians enjoy and honor such complex histories and traditions. In fact it is said that Anglicans have a great appreciation of and appeal to the ancient customs that have gone before us in time and place. This helps connect us to saints past and we feel to saints yet to come. No matter the time of history, past, present or future, we are touching the life line that God grants us. These symbols in our churches remind and call us forward into Christ's service.

Episcopalians not only think of God in Christ but we feel the atmosphere of the Presence of God in our House of Worship. For some our building may seem too ornate, too busy, perhaps distracting even from focusing on God. For most of us however at Palmer, this place helps us feel even more a part of the overall spiritual experience. This place, as is, helps us concentrate our best selves on God and His Presence. There is a distinct feeling and atmosphere in this holy place. Episcopalians are very aware and very serious about **this distinction**. We love “that awareness” of God Present and calling, and we are awed by it. We want to come to the building that houses the sanctuary and **cathedra** (Bishop's Chair) to encounter and be engaged by this experience of the holy.

Please remember if all this is new to you, you are encountering at least 2,000 hundred years of accumulating history and you need to slow down and let yourself absorb the information of the culture over time. Let it seep in. Let it soak you in its vast richness. It is about the variety of ways that we adore The Christ. “There are many roads to the top of the mountain of worship,” wrote Saint Francis. Palmer is just one such expression. This experience and this faith journey take time. We ask and encourage you to Honor that invitation.

The ambo is another name for the **pulpit**. The pulpit is a usual place for the proclamation of the **Gospel** after the Gospel reading. The sermon (or homily) is offered to give further insight and exploration of the Gospel.

The Altar

The **altar** is distinctive as a wooden carved table in the center of the **sanctuary** on its own architectural level. This level is called the predella. This specific architecture used to be called “the priest’s step” for the celebrant or the president of the Holy Eucharist celebrates at the holy table from this specific place behind the altar.

The altar itself hosts not only the carved depiction of The Last Supper but it hosts two other important theological points. The First is the Greek Letter Alpha and the other The Omega.

The import is this. In that Christ is God’s WORD {LOGOS} to the world then all words [logia] are pointing back to the Creator. The Creator and HIS WORD {Christ} sum up what life is and can be [holy]. So to show The Alpha and The Omega is to say Christ is the First and the Last Word. The altar reminds us that Christ Reigns.

In order to add to this symbolism one will be able to note that in Episcopal Churches there are only two candles on the altar. Ever and only two. One is for the Divinity of Christ as God’s Only Son. The other is for the humanity of Jesus who is one of us as fully human. That there are ever only two candles regards simplicity and a complexity of theological approach and grasp all at one moment. Candles signify the warmth and light of creativity. The lights symbolize God’s Purity and the celestial boundlessness of God Himself.

Note also that Palmer’s altar hosts a long white linen cloth. This fair linen is rare and expensive. This cloth has the wondrous symbolism of the shroud or “winding sheet” written about in the Gospel that was provided for the body of Jesus after the Crucifixion. That is a powerful reminder of the debt Christ has paid on our behalf.

This is the place and these are the symbols that captivate the heart, soul and the eyes, not to mention the senses of the priests, as they stand in this most sacred place. It is breathtaking to stand here. Then the priest begins a portion of the Christian Liturgy that has been sung or chanted [cantillation] for almost 2000 years. The Sursum Corda [Lift Up Your Hearts] begins the sung portion of the service. This is high symbolism and deeply meaningful to those of us who have worshipped this way our entire lives. Singing parts of the service used to be called High Church. Actually it is simply “Church” in its most original form. Music is important in the Episcopal Church. The priest then goes into what is called the Proper Preface. This Preface instructs the worshiper of the Church Season both in word and by tonal quality that we are in a certain season and that this certain season hosts its own particular characteristic and theology.

The Nave

To enter the **Nave** (as in navy) we pass through another set of doors. Passages in Christianity are intentional both practically and symbolically in order to demarcate the many stages and passages through which we travel in human living.

Inside the **Nave** you will be struck by its large open space. The arched ceiling is symbolic. The symbols connote two things. The first is an upside down boat. We are all in this one boat together headed toward Christ on the shore of Easter. Our life is a travelogue. Secondly, the arch is a symbol of the bridge of Christ from one life to the next. The arch lastly calls to mind the dome and precinct of heaven. All this is in the mere shape of the ceiling. A ceiling is more than a ceiling and bread is more than bread in the Episcopal Church. Too, the ceiling is decorated with doves in panels. Doves are the sign of The Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Peace is pervasive at Palmer Church.

Please note that the panels are knitted together by yet another historic and heraldic symbol of unity; that being the union of The Houses of York and Lancaster. Henry VIII used the Tutor Rose symbol often. In fact, artistically, because it is a balance symbol, it became another way of depicting peace and well-being. So Peace shows up in a variety of forms and welcomes all. Welcome!

The Aisle

The long **aisle** down the center of the **Nave** is functional for accessing pews. Pews are fixed wooden seating benches for the people of God. Remember this is not a theatre experience. This is work. The bench recalls team work. We are focused on the work of worship, not relaxing in a theatre. This long aisle is not just for a bride to be able to show off her great dress, the LONG aisle symbolizes our mortal life journey to heaven. The heavens are represented by an elevated platform overhead as it were. To access heaven there are steps (more stages and passages = stairs). The Nave floor is representative of what we call “ordinary time” and ordinary life. We know all life is sacred and that there is no ordinary life but it is short hand vocabulary. The Chancel, which is elevated, is the symbol of new life in Christ surrounding His Holy Table where all the saints gather to worship and sing praises to God eternally.

No small symbolology going on here. The entire scope of life and meaning are depicted in the architecture. More on the sanctuary in a bit.

Entering A Pew

When we come into Church, we feel reverent and want to acknowledge that God is present and we have entered into His House, a space perhaps “even nearer” to Him than we were aware of ‘outside’ these sacred precincts.

Many of us, (but not all) **genuflect** or bend the knee a bit before we enter the pew. Why? It reminds us physically that we are in God's House on God's terms (not ours) and some of us "old fashioned" folks go all the way down to the floor on one knee in order to acknowledge God's Presence. This is a kind of official meeting (**hypaponte**) of our heart, soul, mind and body with God. Moses took his sandals off to be in this divine presence. We genuflect (if one's knees allow the physical effort) because it is a physical gesture of reverence. Remember this easy motto: none must, all may, some should. If genuflecting helps you worship God, do it; if not, don't. It's up to you.

Once you have entered your pew, you will notice certain cultural evidences of the Episcopal world.

One is a book rack on the pew back in front of you. These books are common to our worship: The Holy Bible; The Book of Common Prayer; The Hymnal. These are tools for our worship. They help us focus.

You will notice an additional piece of furniture that you likely will not find in many other churches called a kneeler. This part of our culture folds down to provide a place for your knees. We bend the knee and bow the head in our worship of God. When we confess our sins we find this posture of kneeling most appropriate for being in the Presence of God. This is God who knows our every thought and feeling. Our opening prayer in the Eucharistic liturgy offers: "...to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid... (*BCP 355*) Kneeling takes into account the account we must one day give to God.

So back to the spiritual exercises formulary that keeps us fit, we stand to praise God. We sit to listen and learn from scripture and sermons. We kneel to confess our sins and to show utmost respect during the Holy Eucharist at the altar.

You will notice some Episcopalians and visitors cross themselves at certain points of their time in Church. We who do cross ourselves offer this gesture while going into this reverential stance or position. The "crossing of ourselves" isn't mystical or a secret society code. The crossing of ourselves isn't old world or past due. It isn't silly to us, nor is it old fashioned hocus-pocus.

What the making of "the sign of the cross," to we who practice this ritual, is this: we are signifying, marking, making the physical effort to remind ourselves and others that we ourselves, our souls and bodies, have been bought and paid for by Christ's blood and sacrifice on the Cross. You might notice small crosses in the text of the bulletin at certain points. These are the moments that one typically would make the sign. (None must, all may, some should.)

This signifying is a gesture saying: In The Name of The Father, and of The Son, and of The Holy Spirit. We acknowledge that we are in The Presence of the Triune One, and most especially that we are so happy and delighted so to be. That too is an evidence of Episcopal thinking and practice (culture). This is part of Our Anglican (England comes from AENGLAND) Episcopalian Heritage. This kind of saying is centuries old. So it is an Anglican or Episcopal thing to say or write "so to do" or "so to be."

As one sits in the Nave one realizes the open space of the church. It is a tall, open space. This too is symbolic of the nature of God. God is bigger than our expectations and imaginations. In a smaller venue the largess of God may not be as easily, nor as readily, symbolized. Palmer is fortunate enough to host this symbol as a reminder that God is much larger than we can ask or imagine.

Please note: some churches do not make architectural distinctions a priority. In the Episcopal Church we hold to high standards for knowledge, history, and concepts. In the Episcopal Church of Palmer we host:

- A Narthex, entrance room,
- A Nave, the main body of the church where the laity worships
- The Sanctuary which is hosted up a line of stairs and which provides for the elevated place for the Table Rite (Altar Ministry) or the consecration of the bread, wine, and water. These elements are agents of action and focus in the Holy Communion to be administered at the altar rail. One may kneel or stand to receive the consecrated bread and wine (your choice).

The Sanctuary

The **sanctuary** hosts the clergy seating. The Clergy in the Episcopal Church, being members of the One Holy Catholic Church, are called and ordained as **priests**. They officiate at portions of the services from a chair and kneeler known as a **prie-dieu (prayer desk)**. The **sanctuary** also hosts the **altar**, the **ambo** or **pulpit** and the **lectern**. These are familiar terms in many churches but if they have escaped your memory at the moment, here is a short review.

The **lectern** is the place from which a lector (reader) reads the Old and New Testament readings during the service. The **Gospel** is read from the center of the church, in the Nave—among and surrounded by the Laity, the people of God. Most often it is read by a **Deacon**, who is an ordained minister in the Episcopal Church. The Gospel may also be read by a Priest or Bishop.