

**An Illustrated Tour of
Saint John the Evangelist Catholic Church**



Oxford, Mississippi

INTRODUCTION

The traditional Catholic church building is ancient in design and noble in its functional simplicity. St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church was completed in 2008. Our church building follows an ageless precedent in Western church architecture which seeks to honor God in its beauty and retain a visible and easily recognizable continuity with the Christian past in its design. In general, the building follows centuries of development in Catholic church architecture, and can be divided into three separate realms: the **Narthex**, the **Nave** and the **Sanctuary**.

Throughout the day, the church remains open for those who want to come and spend few quiet moments in prayer. The presence of Christ in the tabernacle (which will be further discussed below), truly makes this church *domus dei* – “the house of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15) and it is in reverence and respect to Christ himself that we maintain a respectful silence in the church building.



St. John the Evangelist, patron of our parish

NARTHEX



Our tour begins in the **narthex** of the church. Historically, the narthex – sometimes called the vestibule – is the area located just inside the main entrance of the church. In the early centuries of the Church, the narthex was sometimes part of the church building (as it is in our building), but sometimes it took, instead, the form of an outdoor, covered entryway or portico. The purpose of the narthex in the early Church was to allow those not yet baptized (and, therefore, not yet eligible to enter into the nave, or church proper) a place where they could listen to the first half of the Mass – the Liturgy of the Word – and hear the celebrant’s homily. These men and women, known as *catechumens* or “hearers,” were then dismissed before the beginning of the Eucharistic rites, which only baptized members were allowed to witness.

Holy Water Fonts



Located within our narthex, near each door, are **holy water fonts**. Upon entering the church to pray or for Mass, Catholics will dip their fingers in this blessed water and mark themselves with the sign of the cross. Making the sign of the cross is both a reminder of a Catholic’s faith in the Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and faith in the redemption that Jesus Christ won for the many through his death on the cross. The use of holy water is a simple reminder of one’s baptism.

Doors



The **doors** to the church are a very important architectural feature. When entering through the doors from the narthex into the church proper, you are entering a sacred space – a place set apart and consecrated for the ordered worship of the one, true God. The doors of the church are symbolic of the Christian leaving the world and entering into the house of God. For this reason, they are substantial and conspicuous in their beauty. They symbolize Christ himself, who referred to himself as “the door.” “If any man,” says Jesus, “enters by me, he shall be saved, and he shall go in and go out, and shall find good pastures” (John 10:9). The doors of our church are heavy doors of solid oak. Their shape is that of an arc, a welcoming symbol reminiscent of the bow set in the clouds by God to mark his covenant with Noah and his descendants in the Book of Genesis – the first of God’s covenants open to all and an archetype of the New Covenant of God in Christ, “who desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

NAVE



As we enter through the main doors that separate the narthex from the **nave** (the main body of the church), the eye is immediately drawn to the altar area (known as the sanctuary), with its Great Cross and the beautiful stained glass image of the heavenly Lamb of God above. This is a purposeful focal point which beckons the members of the pilgrim Church upward and onward, to participate in the eternal and heavenly “wedding feast of the Lamb.” But before we move on to the sanctuary and its appointments, we must – both figuratively and literally – spend some time in the nave. This is the area of church that is full of pews, the place set apart for the gathered lay faithful to worship during the celebration of holy Mass.

The term “nave” is derived from the Latin word *navus*, which means “boat.” This part of the church, where the faithful gather to worship together, is called the nave in an allusion to the teaching that the Church is the “bark of Peter,” the vessel carrying Christ’s disciples in a protective embrace through the storms of this life. Many of the earliest church buildings were built in a similar fashion to our own, with the main doors at one end, the sanctuary and altar at the other, and a nave in between. This is a basic basilica shape; a timeless and classic form which has been, for over 1,700 years, the most often-used shape in Catholic architecture. The long, narrow shape of the building necessitates the use of wooden support beams and arches in the ceiling. When left exposed, as they are in our building, these arches and beams are very similar in appearance to the interior hull of a boat.

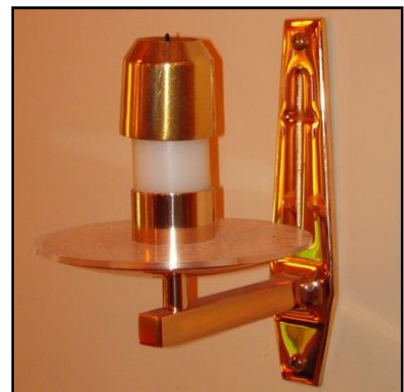
Stations of the Cross



Keeping with the basilica-shaped buildings of early Church architecture, our nave is lined with upper (clerestory) and lower windows. One will also notice images along the side and back walls depicting the **Stations of the Cross**. Numbering fourteen “stations” in all, the Stations of the Cross illustrate the sorrowful journey our Lord took on his way to be crucified. Beginning with the first station – Jesus being condemned to death – at the front of the left wall (when facing the altar), these devotional images are used by those who wish to contemplate the sufferings of our Lord on his way to his crucifixion. There are prayers associated with each station and individual Catholics often make use of this prayerful devotion on Fridays (the day of our Lord’s passion) and throughout the penitential season of Lent (the forty days leading up to Easter). The origins of this traditional Catholic devotion and spiritually-enriching commemoration of our Lord’s Passion can be traced to St. Francis of Assisi in the twelfth century.

Consecration Crosses

During a the dedication Mass for a new Catholic church, the bishop officially consecrates the building and anoints the “four” walls of the building with sacred chrism (specially consecrated oil). The places where the church walls were anointed by the bishop are thereafter marked with **consecration crosses** and candle brackets. These candles are relit on the anniversary of the church’s consecration and may be lit during the Masses of important feast days such as Easter, Pentecost and Christmas.



Statues



At the front of the church, near the sanctuary, appear two statues. One is of **Our Lady** holding the **Christ Child**, the other is of **St. Joseph**, the husband of the Virgin Mary.

Devotional images of Mary and the infant Jesus can be found throughout Christian history. In fact, frescoes of Jesus in the lap of his Mother are some of the oldest-known works of Christian art. This statue was hand-carved in Italy in a fashion reminiscent of late-Gothic sculpture. Mary is depicted wearing a traditional gold-bordered blue mantle and red dress, holding Jesus in a way that shows him to the viewer. Theologically, this is significant because the Church has always taught that Mary always shows us Jesus.

St. Joseph, also hand-carved and painted in Italy in the late-Gothic style, is shown holding the tools of his trade as a carpenter—a saw and a square—as he is the patron saint of workers as well as of the universal Church. The faithful look to St. Joseph as a model of loving patience, humility and hard work and he is revered as the protector of Jesus and his Mother.

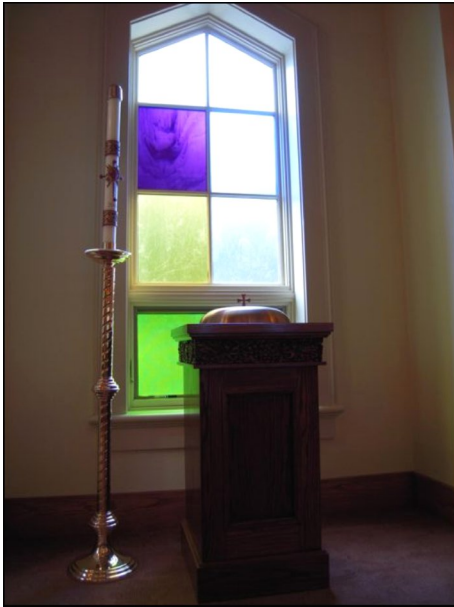
Statues beautify the interior of a church, but they also serve as devotional aids to the faithful. Many faithful light votive candles to accompany their prayers.

Confessional



In the rear of the nave (on the right, when facing the altar), one will find the **confessional** (also known as the reconciliation room). In this room, the faithful approach the limitless mercy of Christ in the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance. Here, the priest hears confessions, gives penances and grants absolution to those who have damaged their relationship with God and with his Church through sin, but are now seeking forgiveness and restoration. Through the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance, the baptized Christian who has fallen through sin and separated himself from God's Church, can be reconciled with God and with his Church and can joyfully reenter the assembly of the faithful.

Baptismal Font and Pascal Candle



The Sacrament of Baptism is the first step in the lifelong journey of Christian faith. The **baptismal font** is used to baptize new Christians and, in its waters, they are “born of water and the Holy Spirit” (John 3:5) to new life in Christ Jesus as members of his Church. Our baptismal font is four-sided, symbolic of the four Evangelists and of the four marks of the Church: “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” The baptismal font is located between the thirteenth and fourteenth Stations of the Cross (which depict taking down from the cross and the burial of Christ, respectively) as a symbolic reminder that “we were buried ... with him by baptism into death so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

During most of the year, a large ornamented candle can be found next to the baptismal font. This is called the **Pascal (or Easter) Candle** and it is a symbol of Christ, the Light of the World. Each year, during the Easter Vigil (the high point of the Catholic Church calendar), a new Pascal Candle is blessed, lighted as a symbol of Christ’s victory over death, and dipped into the water of the baptismal font to bless the waters of Baptism throughout the coming year. This same candle burns at all the Masses during the Easter season (a celebration which, for Catholics, lasts not just one Sunday, but 50 days!). The Paschal Candle also burns at every Baptism and, during funeral Masses, it is placed next to the casket as a powerful reminder to the faithful that those who have been “buried together with him by baptism into death may walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

SANCTUARY



In Catholic churches, the term “sanctuary” (from a Latin root meaning “holy”) is the part of the building where the altar is located. Visually, this special area is the immediate focus of anyone who enters the church. It is purposefully elevated and “set apart” from the assembly in recognition of the holy rites that take place there. There are five major furnishings in the sanctuary: the ambo, the celebrant’s chair, the great crucifix, the tabernacle and the altar. Above our sanctuary is the Agnus Dei window, an original piece of artwork symbolizing Christ as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

Ambo



The **ambo** (from a Greek term meaning “an elevated place”) is the place set aside for the proclamation of the Holy Scriptures during the Mass. As such, it is sometimes referred to as the “table of the Word.” After readings from the Scripture and the Gospel have been proclaimed, the ambo is then used as the appropriate place from which the priest or deacon delivers his homily (i.e. sermon), emulating Christ who, according to the Gospels, often preached from hillsides or elevated places. The reading of the Scriptures and their interpretation by those ordained by the Church are sacred functions, so the ambo is elevated and is reserved only for these purposes. In our church, the ambo is constructed of beautifully carved wood which displays an eagle on its front: the timeless symbol of St. John the Evangelist, the namesake of our parish. For general announcements, and for the prayers of the faithful during the Mass, the lectern, which is smaller, less elaborate and located on the opposite side of the sanctuary, is used.

Celebrant's Chair



The **celebrant's chair** is the seat for the presiding priest during the Mass. According to the *General Instructions for the Roman Missal*, this chair “[signifies] his office of presiding over the gathering and directing the prayer” (No. 310). Within the sanctuary, there are also seats for the deacon and for the altar servers who assist the priest and deacon during the Mass. The chairs carry on the “grapevine” motif in their woodcarving, a motif found in the woodwork throughout the church, a subtle reminder of our connection to one another and to Christ in his Church (see John 15:5).

Great Crucifix



Hanging immediately over the altar is a large crucifix, or **great crucifix**. This hand-carved, Italian crucifix is a stunning and powerful visual reminder of the connection between the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Mass which takes place on the altar just below.

The St. John's crucifix was modeled after the famed "Cimabue Crucifix" – a masterpiece by the Italian artist Cenni de Pepo (also known as Cimabue), the last great European painter in the Byzantine tradition. Cimabue's crucifix is one of the best examples of a thirteenth century, Byzantine-influenced genre called *christus patiens* ("suffering Christ"). This style appeared at a pivotal time in Church history that witnessed both the birth of the modern university system as well as a resurgence of popular piety among the laity. For this reason, it is a fitting symbol of our parish which serves Mississippi's first university and a town which has long-fostered a very devoted Catholic community.

The *christus patiens* style was influenced by Byzantine (or Eastern) crucifixion iconography. It is appealing to modern-day believers for the same reason that it appealed to ancient believers: because it evokes a compassionate and empathetic response from the viewer. The emotive image of Christ hanging lifeless on the cross from the nails in his outstretched hands, his head bowed to one side, forces the viewer to consider the sufferings of Christ and his sacrificial death for mankind.

On the cross, our crucified Lord is depicted with nails through his hands and feet, bleeding wounds and his head bowed to one side with eyes closed. The open wound in his side indicates that the agonies of the crucifixion are over. The body is visibly hanging from the cross in a slumped posture symbolic of the brazen serpent raised up by Moses, an archetype of the saving cross of Christ (see Numbers 21:8 and John 3:13-14). In pendants on either side of Christ's outstretched arms, the Most Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist gaze in awe and sorrow on the body of our Lord. The inclusion of these witnesses to the crucifixion is an ancient tradition in Christian art, an artistic reference both to the scriptural reality that Christ's sacrifice took place in the view of both his mother and of "the beloved disciple," and to the symbolic reality that Jesus' sacrifice is the root of our apostolic faith (symbolized by John), and benefits all of the Church (symbolized by Mary).

Hanging just above the altar, its central position is visually and theologically significant; it is between the altar of sacrifice (a symbol of Christ among his people) and the large stained-glass window above which depicts Christ as *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God who eternally offers himself in sacrifice to God the Father for the forgiveness of sins. These three (the altar, the crucifix and the window) form a symbolic axis which draws our reflection in a vertical direction and proclaims to all who enter that the eternal sacrifice of Christ is the central foundation of the Church and that the most holy Eucharist, the re-presentation of that sacrifice during holy Mass, is truly "the source and summit of the Christian life" (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 11).



Tabernacle and Sanctuary Lamp



Given a place of definitive honor within the sanctuary is our church's **tabernacle**, a gilded vessel which houses the Most Blessed Sacrament (consecrated communion Hosts) which is reserved to be taken to the infirm and home-bound. Inside the tabernacle, Jesus Christ is present – really and substantially. The Real Presence of Christ within the tabernacle makes it a focus of devotion and prayer for the faithful outside of the Mass. Near the tabernacle, hanging from a bracket, is the **sanctuary lamp**, a red lamp which continually burns before the tabernacle to indicate the honor and presence of Christ. Our tabernacle and sanctuary lamp are two of the church furnishings which were originally found in our first parish church, circa 1942. Both were beautifully restored for use in our new building.

Altar



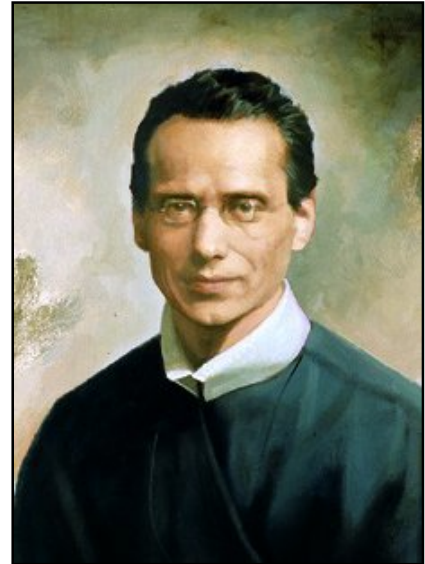
The altar is the most important feature of a Catholic church building just as the Holy Eucharist, which is celebrated thereon, is “the source and summit of Christian life” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 11). The altar symbolizes Christ among his people and so, architecturally, it is the focal point of our church; all who gather together in the celebration of Mass face the altar of Christ as God’s own people, processing towards the new and heavenly Jerusalem. The altar is constructed of hand-carved wood with a *mensa* (the top of the altar) of solid, polished marble. To further dignify and enhance the altar’s beauty, a medallion on the front depicts Christ offering his Body and Blood, “the Bread of life,” in fulfillment of the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel.

Upon the altar, there is an altar cross and six brass candlesticks. This arrangement upon the altar, known as the Benedictine arrangement, is meant to ensure that the focus of the priest and the people during the Mass remains solely on Christ (symbolized by the altar cross). The candlesticks, which date back to the original St. John’s church of 1942, are a symbolic reminder that in the Mass, we participate imperfectly in the eternal liturgy of heaven. In Holy Scripture, seven is the number of perfection and the Son of Man appears in the midst of seven lamp stands (Revelation 1:12-13), but we are not yet there – we have only six candles to remind us of the heavenly perfection that is our final goal.

In the early centuries of the Church, altars were often constructed over the tomb of important saints. In time, as the Church spread throughout the world, connection with this tradition was retained by enclosing relics of saints inside the altars of new churches before they were consecrated. Our altar contains the relics of two such men: Saint John Baptist de la Salle, the patron saint of teachers, and Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, a martyr of charity who died while ministering to Yellow Fever victims in nineteenth century New Orleans.



St. John Baptist de la Salle



Bl. Francis Xavier Seelos



Medallion of Christ on the front of the altar



Memorare

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thine intercession was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen.



A Prayer to St. Joseph

O blessed Joseph, faithful guardian of my Redeemer, Jesus Christ, protector of thy chaste spouse, the virgin Mother of God, I choose thee this day to be my special patron and advocate and I firmly resolve to honor thee all the days of my life.

Therefore I humbly beseech thee to receive me as thy client, to instruct me in every doubt, to comfort me in every affliction, to obtain for me and for all the knowledge and love of the Heart of Jesus, and finally to defend and protect me at the hour of my death. Amen.

En ego, o bone et dulcissime Iesu



Here, O good and gentle Jesus, I kneel before you, and with all the fervor of my soul I pray that you engrave within my heart lively sentiments of faith, hope, and love, true repentance for my sins, and a firm purpose of amendment. While I see and I ponder your five wounds with great affection and sorrow in my soul, I have before my eyes those words of yours that David prophesied about you: "They have pierced my hands and feet; I can count all my bones." (Ps 22, 17) Amen.