



St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church

Spiritual meanings imbedded in the architecture. Keys to understanding the intricacies of its architecture as an expression of Catholic faith and cosmology.

Revelations 21: 1-6

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And he sat upon the throne and said, behold I make all things new.

And he said unto me, It is done. I am the Alpha and Omega.

Cosmology is both the study of the origins as well as the end of things. In modern science we study the origins of our universe as articulated in the Big Bang Theory supported by compelling mathematics. Arguments such as Penrose's number; $10^{10^{123}}$ to 1 have been instrumental in modern times to dispel the notion that the universe is simply a random creation. These scientific theories are in substantial harmony with Catholic religious cosmology and support the 'Alpha' aspects of our understanding of creation.

The architecture at St. Thomas expresses many elements of our Catholic faith's cosmology, taken from the Bible's prophetic books such as the book of Revelation and Ezekiel, which is the study of what we look forward to at the end of our life's Journey.

The architecture of St. Thomas is intended to serve as both a physical as well as a spiritual passage from darkness into light: from our interior asymmetry to spiritual symmetry. For example, we can see that the architects purposely sharpened the contrast between the more dimly illuminated narthex at the entrance to the church with the brightly lit apse surrounding the altar and thereby presenting a path of light. Symbolically then, this serves as a spiritual itinerary, an experience of inner progression and journey which starts in the shadows of the narthex, continues through the increasingly illuminated nave and culminates in the bright light of the apse with its central altar.

As we enter the doors of the church, persuasion and conversion are the themes emanating from Christ's figure in the tympanum above the entrance to the church. This is conveyed artistically in glass with St. Thomas' confession of faith and his recognition of Jesus as his lord and savior. John 20:28. In our churches, we surround ourselves with saints, in statues, windows and paintings because catholic theology understands them to be not just individuals who have lived in the past but are in the present as well. They exist out of time as we will someday exist out of time and so we portray them in our midst as we worship. St. Thomas is often depicted with instruments of construction such as the carpenter's square, compass and hammer as are shown in the statues of him in the courtyard, on the sconces at the entrance and behind the tabernacle. He is portrayed thus as an Apostle and builder of the church.

There are eight clerestory windows in the church narthex (the area immediately inside the doors of the church). The purpose of clerestory windows is to shed light on an interior space. In this case, the light conveys a heavenly light illuminating the soul as one enters the more dimly lit narthex. Eight is the number of heavenly perfection in Catholic cosmology. It is the number associated with Jesus our savior. In the Hebrew as well as Greek alphabets, each letter is representative of a number. The name of Jesus, very common at the time of our Lord's birth, is written IHSOUS in Greek. In the Greek numbering system, the numbering is I = 10, H = 8, S = 200, O = 70, U = 400, S = 200. Thus, the sum of our Lord's name expressed in Greek is 888. Eight is the dominant number in the architecture of St. Thomas' church which will increase in tempo and appearance as we approach and come to the altar.

In Catholic theology, the numbers 3, 7 and 8 are significant in that they portray respectively: the trinity(3), the number of earthly perfection 7, Genesis 2:2-3, and heavenly perfection and new beginnings (8). Omega is the final letter in the Greek alphabet and in Rev 21: 4-6 we have Jesus as the Alpha (beginning) and Omega (the end) or culmination of all things.

Before leaving the narthex, we can count 24 Omegas in groups of four immediately below the clerestory windows, each signaling eternity. There are two tympanums in the narthex; the outer entrance tympanum with St. Thomas and his confession to the Lord and the interior tympanum as one enters the nave of the church showing Mary, the mother of God and the baby Jesus.

As we enter the main church and proceed along the nave (the center aisle) we notice that there are eight pillars supporting the vaulted ceiling of the church.

Proceeding down the nave we also see that the church is arrayed in a cruciform pattern (the shape of a cross) with the nave forming the vertical axis of the cross and the altar with its transept forming the horizontal or transverse axis. Many churches in medieval Europe are constructed in cruciform fashion.

Midway down the nave if we turn around we see the stations of the cross on the back wall of the main part of the church. We can see the fourteen stations are evenly divided by the nave into two parts; 1 through 7 to the right and 8 through 14 on the left. In the seventh station, it portrays Jesus falling a second time. In the fourteenth station, it portrays Jesus being laid in this tomb. In Catholic cosmology the number seven is the number of earthly perfection. Genesis 2:2-3 *"and God rested on the seventh day"*. Graphically portrayed in the stations then is 'rest' for when one falls one rests and when one is laid in a tomb we say they are laid to 'rest'.

Turning forward to continue our walk down the nave we notice the altar which appears supported by 8 porticoes.

Immediately behind the altar are three seats where the priests and deacons sit during mass. The large seat signifies the teaching authority of the priest.

Above the altar is a dome shaped as an octagon. Within the dome are 24 clerestory windows. Twenty-four is the number of elders in Revelations 4: 4, Each holding golden bowls which are the prayers of the saints. If we divide the number of windows (24) by 3, the number of the trinity, we again get three 8s, the number of Jesus' name.

Further, looking to the East we see the Baptistry which is seated as a dome within an octagon. It is significant that the baptistry is situated within the church to the East of the altar and signifies as in Ezekiel 47: 1-9. The waters from the temple flow to the East.. where they give life.

There are 24 omegas throughout the transept and altar area. The floor protruding out and around the altar are shaped as 3 omegas. The ambo or lectern has the image of an omega. Eight omegas form the top of each arch in the eight porticos surrounding the altar. The 4 arches surrounding the apse are shaped as omegas, There are three exterior arches which frame the view to the mountains and each is shaped as an omega. There is one omega directly above the priests' chair forming a structure (the Reredos) and within it are four omegas. Thus, in total there are twenty-four omegas in and around the apse and twenty-four divided by 3 again give us 888, the name of Jesus.

Further the surface of the stone surrounding the altar is highly polished like glass, as portrayed in Rev 4: 6-8. *And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle.*

Surrounding the congregation are four windows, each grouped in twos, on the east and west sides of the church depicting the four evangelists from the four beasts of the apocalypse. In each you can see expressed in stained glass the four evangelists: to the East, Matthew – a man and Mark, the lion, to the West Luke, the calf and John the eagle. Rev 5: 6-8. *And I saw and behold, in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a lamb was standing, as if slain.*

And he approached and received the book from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne.

And when he had opened the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb, each having stringed instruments, as well as golden bowls full of fragrances, which are the prayers of the saints.

Behind the apse are clear windows showing a panorama of the Santa Catalina mountains and is meant to focus our attention towards the grandeur of God, eternity and our eventual home in heaven.

Glossary of Terms

Narthex: The entry area of the church. It serves as a transition space between the outside world and the sacred interior of the church.

Apse: The area behind and surrounding the altar which serves as a focal point of the church interior.

Nave: The central part of the church where the congregation gathers for worship. The word nave comes from the Latin word navis meaning “ship” and symbolizes the Church being a vessel carrying believers towards salvation.

Tympanum: The semi-circular space above the entrance doorway which serves both an artistic as well as didactic purpose.

Tabernacle: A sacred, locked enclosure near the altar where the Eucharist is stored and used for as a place of adoration. A lamp is placed nearby indicating presence of the Blessed Sacrament.