

The Temple of God
Fr. John Konkle

The temple is the place where God dwells. He is present everywhere, but He makes His home in the temple. Solomon's temple is often called 'the *house* of Lord'. At the culmination of the temple's consecration, we read: "When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. When all the children of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord upon the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the earth on the pavement, and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" (2 Chron 7:1-3). This is the place where God had come to dwell.

There was only one temple, located in Jerusalem, and it was there that Jews would go for major feasts like Passover (Pascha) and Pentecost. When our Lord appeared on the earth, He was often found at the temple, often amid great tensions. For example, St. John records His cleansing of the temple (Jn 2:13-17), after which Jesus was asked, "What sign do You show to us, since you do these things?" (Jn 2:18). He replied: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19; *cf.* Mt 26:61; Mk 14:58). His listeners, characteristically indignant at His claim, responded: "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and You will raise it up in three days?" (Jn 2:20). The dialogue ends abruptly at this point with St. John providing a succinct and revealing commentary: "But he was speaking of the temple of His body" (Jn 2:21). His body was the dwelling place of God. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). This temple will be destroyed, hung on the cross and buried in a tomb, but in three days it will be raised up. It is for this reason that, later in His ministry, Jesus refers to Himself when he says: "Something greater than the temple is here" (Mt 12:6). For His body is a living temple, and even more, a temple which can die only to be resurrected into incorruption.

When Solomon was preparing to build the temple, he asked, "But who is able to build [God] a temple, since heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Him" (2 Chron 2:6)? How does one contain the uncontainable? Solomon's dilemma is never adequately resolved by the temple he constructed, but we sing of the Theotokos that she is more spacious than the heavens, and that she contains the uncontainable. She did what Solomon's temple could not do, for in her dwelt the one "in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9). She is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "The Lord Himself will give you a sign. A virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel" (Is 7:14). 'Emmanuel,' as St. Matthew tells us, means 'God with us' (Mt 1:23). God is with us, in the womb of His mother. This is the sign that the Lord Himself has provided. Elizabeth recognized this sign for when Mary visited her she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:42-43). The great mystery of our salvation, Jesus being truly God and truly man, is enveloped in the womb of Mary, and she too becomes the temple of the living God. The glory which filled Solomon's temple has been surpassed by the living presence of the eternal Son of God in the womb of a young virgin.

While the early Church continued to worship in the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 3:1), St Paul extends the notion of the temple to the Christian community: “[W]e are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” (2 Cor. 6:16). He further develops this theme in his Letter to the Ephesians. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:19-22). Unlike Solomon’s temple, but like Christ and the Theotokos, this temple is a living temple, but here it is a living *community*. St. Peter also expresses our relationship to one another as building material in God’s house: “Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built [into] a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ “ (1 Pt 2:4-5; see also St. John, Rev 3:12). When we gather for Holy Liturgy, drawn together by the common cup of Christ’s body and blood, we form a living temple “to offer Your own of Your own on behalf of all and for all.” We are being fitted together, united to one another, laying aside all divisions so that we might offer up spiritual sacrifices. It is here that we, not the building we inhabit but we ourselves, form the living temple which the glory of the Lord fills ever more fittingly than Solomon’s temple. Like the Theotokos, collectively we form a space wider than the heavens, containing the uncontainable.

We come to this common assembly as living stones, but what makes us alive? Surely it is the Holy Spirit. Brought into the Church by the holy mysteries of baptism and chrismation, a person is given the Holy Spirit and made a living stone in the living temple founded on the apostles with Jesus Christ being the cornerstone. Jesus promised His disciples that He will send the Holy Spirit to be with them and in them (Jn 14:17). And it is a common theme throughout St. John’s and St. Paul’s writings that we are in Christ, and He is in us. Each living stone is, then, in a sense, a temple of the living God. This is what St. Paul has in mind when he sternly warns the Corinthian Church: “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? (1 Cor 6:17-19). Like Christ our bodies are temples, called to die only to be raised incorruptible.

When we follow the practices of the Holy Orthodox Tradition, the building in which we gather is patterned after Solomon’s temple with a narthex (outer court), nave (holy place), and sanctuary (holy of holies). It is also treated as if it were a person since the consecration service is patterned after rites of Christian initiation: the building is baptised and chrismated. It is here that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, and it is here that the living stones gather to be formed into the living temple. The building we inhabit, then, is also a temple, a place where God dwells in His gathered people and is present in the Holy Eucharist. Christ is in our midst!

Misc extra material:

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are” (1 Cor 3:16-17).

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own.” (1 Cor 6:19).

St. Paul teaches that the design of and worship in the temple, and before it in the tabernacle, are copies and shadows of what takes place in the heavenly realm (Heb 8:5; 9:23). This is vividly expressed by the Holy Prophet Ezekiel: As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple. Then he brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple; and I looked, and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple of the LORD; and I fell upon my face. (Ez 43:4-5; 44:4; cf Ezekiel 41-44)

And this heavenly worship is precisely what St. John tells us is the destiny of all saints for all time:

Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. ... [A]nd the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended. ... The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. (Rev. 7:15; 15:8; 16:17; 21:22)

At the Little Entrance, the priest prays these words:

O Lord our God, Master of All, who has appointed hosts and ranks of angels and archangels for the service of your glory, grant that there may be with our entrance also an entrance of your holy angels serving together with us and glorifying your goodness.

St Maximus: uniting the Heavenly & Eucharistic Liturgy in our hearts.

This was the fulfillment of the Tabernacle constructed when Israel was wondering in the wildness:

Ex. 40:34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Ex 40:34-35; cf Exodus 26; 36; 38)

Psa. 11:4 The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD’s throne is in heaven; his eyes behold, his eyelids test, the children of men.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. (Is 6:1)