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“These Truths We Hold” (Part VIII)

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Altar prepared for the Liturgy (St Catherine's monastery, Mount Sinai).

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The Iconostasis.

The most prominent feature of an Orthodox church is the Iconostasis, consisting of one or more rows of Icons and broken by a set of doors in the center (the Holy Doors) and a door at each side (the Deacon's Doors). In ancient times, the Iconostasis was probably a screen placed at the extreme Eastern end of the church (a tradition still preserved by Russian Old-Believers), but quite early it was moved out from the wall as a sort of barrier between the Nave and the Altar, with the opening and closing of curtains making the Altar both visible and inaccessible.

The Holy Fathers envisioned the church building as consisting of three mystical parts. According to Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople, a Confessor of Orthodoxy during the ico-noclastic controversies (7th-8th Centuries), "the church is the earthly heaven where God, Who is above heaven, dwells and abides, and it is more glorious than the [Old Testament] tabernacle of witness. It is foreshadowed in the Patriarchs, is based on the Apostles..., it is foretold by the Prophets, adorned by the Hierarchs, sanctified by the Martyrs, and its high Altar stands firmly founded on their holy remains...." Thus, according to St. Simeon the New Theologian, "the [Vestibule] corresponds to earth, the [Nave] to heaven, and the holy [Altar] to what is above heaven" [Book on the House of God, Ch. 12].

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