

May 16, 2021 - Ascension of the Lord



Greetings!

Sometimes a church catches your eye as one that stands head and shoulders above the rest in style and elegance. The arrestingly beautiful Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Ascension in the southern Kazakhstani town of Almaty is one of those.

Not only is the cathedral amazingly colorful, but it is also made entirely of wood yet is constructed *without using a single nail!*

This cathedral lays claim to the title of second tallest all-wood church in the world (184 feet). [We'll talk about the tallest wood church below.]



Christianity in Central Asia

For starters, Kazakhstan is one of the “-stan” republics that form a sort of land buffer of small nations between Russia to the north, India to the south, and China to the east. It’s a corridor of formerly Christian states that still maintains a Christian presence which has been significantly reduced since Soviet times and the spread of Islam into Central Asia and Eastern Europe. (Click on image to enlarge.)

This magnificent cathedral springs out of vast emptiness like a jewel of light and spiritual life.

To give some perspective, about 70% of the country’s population of 19 million is Muslim. Christians comprise about a quarter of the population, of which the vast majority are Eastern Orthodox. The Catholic presence is very small, somewhere around 1.5%.

About the Cathedral

Ascension Cathedral is over a hundred years old (dedicated in 1907), but even in such a relatively short period of history, it has a remarkable track record of survival and grace. Here is a quick summary of facts from the [Wikipedia](#) entry for the cathedral:

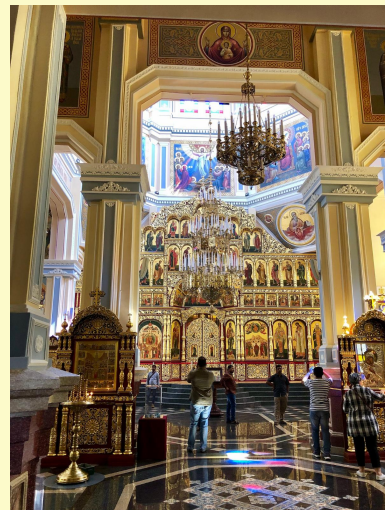
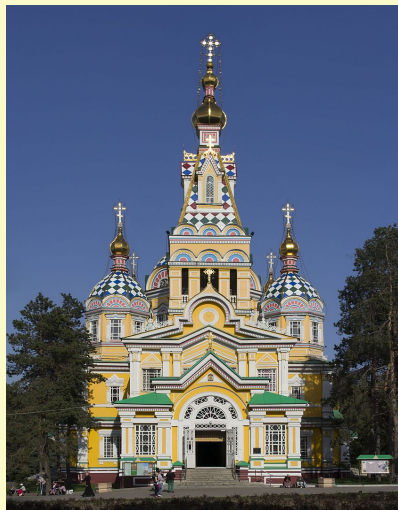
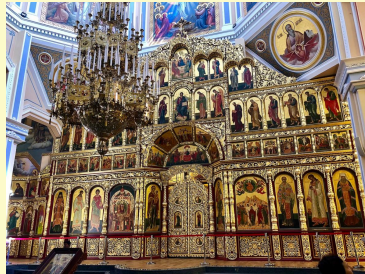
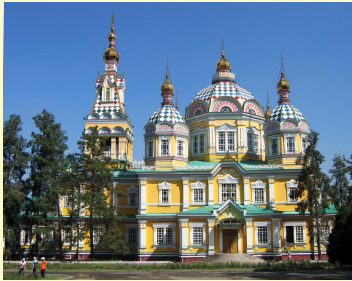
The cathedral survived the 1911 earthquake with minimal damage, even though it was built without any nails, which some bishops attributed to divine intervention....

After the Russian Revolution the cathedral was used to house the Central State Museum of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. From 1930 to 1940 it was used by notable public organizations. The first radio transmitters in Almaty were situated in the cathedral's belfry.

Restoration work on the cathedral began in 1973 and lasted until 1976. In May 1995 control of the cathedral was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1997, after additional restoration work, it was reopened for religious services.

An amazing church!

Here are a few images of the Cathedral, which, if you click on them, will open in their own windows for a better look. This cathedral is a true festival of beauty on this blessed Feast of the Ascension.



The Tallest

Now, about that tallest all-wood church: I believe the title belongs to an “interesting” church on the coast of Norway, near Bergen, called the Knarvik Community Church.

[Full disclosure: I couldn't find the height of the spire listed anywhere on the Internet, but it's an all-wood church, and it looks taller. Whatever the actual measure of it, I'm going to use it to make a point about beauty and worship! Here goes.]

This church towers over a desolate Norwegian landscape and is said to have been built entirely with “mottled pine heartwood”, which is from the durable center of the pine tree, necessary to weather the harsh Scandinavian environment. They say it's an *avant garde* recreation of a Norwegian “stave church” of the Middle Ages, but that's a stretch. The only thing it really has in common with the stave churches is lots of wood.

The Knarvik Community Church was built in 2014 and looks a bit more like a Darth Vader spiked death star than a church, but I may be in the minority here. When the community conducted a design competition for a new church, apparently so many sophisticated people liked this design they decided to spend \$11.4 million to build it!

In fact, the church has won design awards and huge amounts of publicity from magazines and TV stations and other very sophisticated people – it's all the rage!

Here are a few images of the Knarvik Community Church, which will also open in their own windows for a better look.



The Importance of Beauty in Worship

Comparing these two churches is almost like comparing apples and oranges, given their histories. The cathedral in Central Asia was built 100 years ago and was the product of a fully Christian culture with a strong liturgical / sacramental tradition of worship. The minimalist architecture of the latter is simply a reflection of its concept of worship in a post-Christian culture that has long been emptied of faith and liturgical traditions.

A friend of mine noted it's impressive that any church at all was built in Norway! Worship is essentially a matter of the heart, of course, and we know that God honors every good intention of faith.

Yet, there is an intimate connection between beauty and worship, a principle to which the sacramental traditions of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy hold firm. In other words, there is a theology behind a traditional church:

1. *A church building in all its elements is supposed to raise the heart and mind to God and not distract from worship.*
2. *It is to be a small "model" of heaven and heavenly worship in some way.*
3. *The physical church environment aims to draw the worshiper into prayer (through an appeal to the senses, audio-visual inspiration, etc.)*

In light of this, a few points of contrast will highlight the way in which the sacramental / liturgical traditions offer a potentially fuller experience of grace for the worshiper:

- **Architecture:** the entire cathedral floorplan is in the pattern of a Cross versus the community church's rectangular box. The cathedral's structural elements consist in orderly levels (vertical and horizontal), domes, arches, icon screen, tower-belfry-bells, elaborate columns, etc. versus bare walls at sharp angles and a spire with an empty cross.
- **Decorations:** the cathedral exhibits a full spectrum of vibrant colors (on the interior *and* exterior) with icons, paintings, medallions, chandeliers, crucifixes filling every space. This stands in contrast to a single color (bare wood) for the entire community church environment, decorated by one rather unimaginative stained glass window over the sanctuary and *fluorescent lighting* throughout (ugh)!
- **Congregation:** those who enter the cathedral are worshippers who pray as their souls are transported heavenward like incense. The odd liturgical philosophy behind the community church, however, believes that those who enter the bare church actually *become its decorations*: that is, their living flesh, clothing, and voices decorate the desolate space. The logic of that philosophy is that it makes the worshiper into an object and a sort of quasi-liturgical functionary rather than the subject of a spiritual experience.
- **Aesthetic Appeal:** what can we say of the two experiences of beauty? The one draws the worshiper into prayer through appeal to the senses: sight (pleasing lines and colors); smell (incense!); hearing (bells, music, chanting), etc. The other may also have a number of these elements (certainly music), but the overall aesthetic appeal is one of disjointed, uninspiring, empty space.

Which church, in your opinion, is more effective as a conduit of grace to the soul – the Ascension Cathedral of Kazakhstan or the Community Church of Norway?

I don't know about you, but for me, it's not much of a choice.

Our Feature Articles

A dear friend of mine, who was a Ukrainian Catholic priest, passed away last year, and the study of the cathedral's architecture reminded me of his holiness and an experience I once had at the beautiful Ukrainian liturgy.

Our **first feature article**, "The Clothes Make the Man", is about how the priestly vestments contribute to the experience of Mass.

Our **second article** is a touching story about a great artist, "The Inspiring Story Behind the Praying Hands".

[Visit the Newsletter Archives](#)

The Clothes Make the Man



The Inspiring Story Behind the Praying Hands



A blessed feast of the Ascension of the Lord to you and yours!

Peter Darcy

PS – I would love to get your feedback on any of the articles on the Sacred Windows site. Each article has a response mechanism at the end of the article, or you can certainly write to me directly at the email below.

Significant Blessings this Easter Season

Web Excellence Award

In April, the *Sacred Windows* website was chosen for the Web Excellence Award for "Religion & Spirituality" websites.



Deo Gratias!

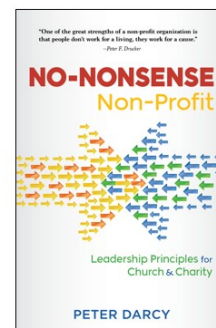
Kops-Fetherling International Book Award

In May, Peter Darcy's book *No-Nonsense Non-Profit: Leadership Principles for Church and Charity* was selected as the Gold Award winner in this book international competition.

Gold Award
Category: Leadership



CELEBRATING GREAT BOOKS





TO CONTACT PETER:

Email: peterdarcy@sacredwindows.com

Author's Website: www.petedarcywriting.com

Strength of Soul Books: publisher@strengthofsoulbooks.com
