

## **ANGLICAN ARCANA: Sanctuary**

From time to time, I have been inadvertently engaged in conversations with several members of a Buildings and Grounds Committee about the term “sanctuary.” So, in between various meetings, a wedding, and a funeral one Saturday, I did a bit of “broad brush” research. My findings follow.

Based on this (and a most interesting conversation with an acquaintance about keeping the Berrigan brothers safe from the police in the 1970s), we cannot claim that it is entirely incorrect to use the term “sanctuary” when referring to the overall structure of any house of worship. But there are several things that mitigate against this practice: (1) the original Hebrew and Latin meanings, in which the term is applied not to a structure of any kind of but to *furniture* within such a structure or even under a tent, (2) a sense that this original term was broadened primarily for political reasons (i.e., to provide more space in which to protect people from persecution), and (3) the plain fact that the term is simply confusing.

From my undergraduate days as a student of architectural history, I can assure you that a Rectory, a Parish House, and a Church are separate buildings. The church comprises many parts, including nave, narthex, aisles, quire, and chancel. Given that the term “sanctuary” equated to the overall church for some, the tabernacle to others, and the space inside the altar rail to others—well, it’s probably best simply to avoid it. I suspect it would save confusion.

“Church,” of course is not without its own confusion, as it can refer to the corporate body known at the Church of the Ascension, the incarnate body of Christ in the world, all of Christianity—and many things in between. But *architecturally*, when we say “church” we do not mean anything other than the primary space set apart for worship and praise of God. Ω

### *Catholic Encyclopedia*

- *Tabernacle* in Biblical parlance usually designates the movable tent-like sanctuary of the Hebrews before the erection of Solomon's Temple. We should distinguish the tent (or tabernacle or sanctuary) proper from the sacred enclosure in which the tent stood.
- A consecrated place giving protection to those fleeing from justice or persecution.

### *Oxford Dictionary of the Church*

- The part of the church containing the altar. It is sometimes termed the ‘presbytery,’ as being the portion of the church properly reserved to the clergy.
- As distinguished from a “right of sanctuary,” in which those claiming the privilege “sometimes had to touch a particular object in the church (in early times, often the altar).”

### *Oxford English Dictionary*

- In classical Latin, the word occurs only in the sense of ‘the private cabinet of a prince.’

- The sense of ‘holy place’ is common in the Vulgate and Christian Latin generally.
- A building or place set apart for the worship of God.
- A specially holy place within a temple or church.
- A shrine or box containing relics.

For “church,” incidentally, the *OED* gives “the building, the Lord’s house” as its first meaning