

# The church as a building

---

The word "Church" comes from the Greek word "Éκκλησία" which means "invite", it is used to refer to "a group of invited people to the same place for the same reason", it also points out to our presence in the church expresses our partaking with the Lord Jesus Christ.

## There are two Perceptions of the word "Church":

1. Spiritual Perception: A group of believers.
2. Literal perception: A place specified for worship.

### Or

1. Endeavoring (striving) Church: Seen. (Mathew 18:18)
2. Victorious church: Concealed. (revelation 6:9) & (Revelation 7:9)

## I. Church Shapes:

---



### 1. Cross:

We were redeemed through the cross. When we are in church it is as if we endured, were crucified, and victoriously were raised with our Lord Jesus Christ.



## 2. Circle:

Circular in shape as eternity, it has neither beginning nor end. Whoever comes to the church attains eternal life.



## 3. Ark:

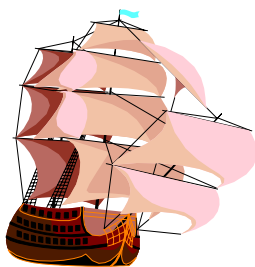
As the ark was the only reason that Noah and his family were saved, also the church is the only way to save the believers from the evil of the world.

In addition, the dimensions of the ark are very comparable to those of the human body.

**The Lord Christ (the symbol of Ark) became man to save us.**

The length of the body = 6 X his width, and 10 X his girth

[The Church's Fathers teach us the following symbolisms:](#)



The Ship carries many different people from different races in the midst of a fierce tempest,  
God the Father is the owner of the ship,  
The Lord Christ is the captain,  
The Bishop is the watchman,  
The priests are the seamen; the deacons are the rowers,

The sea is the world in which the church has sailed in, but it is not destroyed because its captain is very clever.

---

---

---



### The Steeple:

To a Church, the steeple is like a mast to a ship. It is preferable that it be erected separate from a main building of the church, so that the vibrations of the bells do not affect the structure.

---



### The Bells:

The bells sound at a certain time or a prayer (e.g. during the Offertory etc.) and have a different tune for each occasion. This is to enable those prevented by extreme circumstances from attending church, to pray concurrently at their locations or to make way to the Church.

---



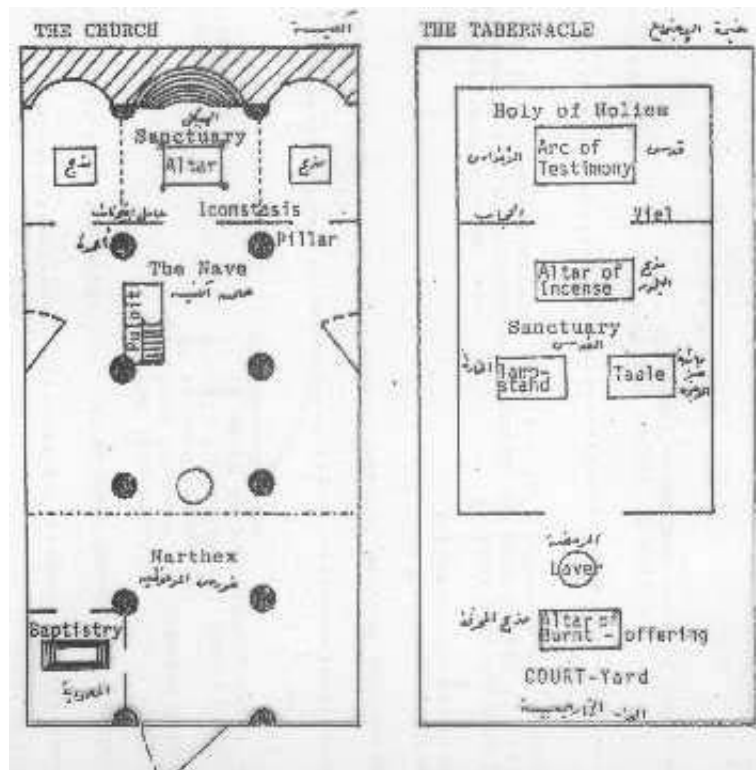
## The Doors:

Symbolic of the Holy Trinity, the Orthodox Church should have three doors to form the entrance and exit, to and from the Church. The main door is the western door, so that all entrants face the east where the Holy Altar is located. The remaining doors are located on the northern and southern side. These three doors therefore symbolize the Holy Trinity and the doors to the Kingdom: "the way, the truth and the life".

---

## II. The church from the inside:

The church is divided into two main quarters: The Sanctuary (the Holy of Holies), and the Nave.



*Comparison between the Old Testament Sanctuary/Tabernacle (right), and the modern day Sanctuary/Church (left)*

## 1. The Sanctuary (the Holy of Holies):

The Sanctuary is the most holy place in the church and is to be built higher than the level of the Church Hall so that eyes can gaze at it. The top of the door should bear the inscription: *"This is the gate of the Lord, and through it the righteous shall enter in..." (Ps. 118:20)*. The lower part should bear the inscription: *"Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye raise ye ancient doors, so that the King of Glory may enter." (Ps. 24:9)*

---



❖ **The Altar**: It is in the middle of the sanctuary, not attached to any walls; it is an example of the tomb of Jesus or the Golgotha, where He was crucified. It is called the Holy

Table. The existence of the Altar adds more Holiness to the Sanctuary.

### **Material of the altar:**

- **Wood:**
  1. As the cross or the tree of life which was in the middle of Paradise
  2. Christ Himself performed the last supper on a wooden altar
  3. Easier to move in times of persecution

- **Stone:** like the tomb of Jesus
- **Precious Metal:** e.g. silver or gold as an extreme means of expressing respect to the Lord's Holy Table.

Regardless of the type of material from which the altar is made, it is to be constructed like the shape of the Savior's tomb (i.e. it is not to be erected on pillars but walls with a cavity so as to accommodate relics of Saint's - See Rev. 6:9).

---

---



### The Altar Coverings:

As the altar holds a high standing in the Church, it is customary to cover it with dear coverings symbolizing the shroud which wrapped the most Holy Body of our Savior, upon his burial. The coverings of the altar are comprised of three layers:

1. Cotton or linen or silk - reaching the floor evenly on all four sides.
2. Second layer - more expensive in material and craft. The holy slate is placed between the above two layers.
3. Aprosvarin - (meaning offertory) is lifted from the altar after reconciliation prayer, which resembles the stone which was rolled away from the Holy tomb by the angel. Bells are sewn on it so that as it is lifted, the ringing denotes the earth shaking when the Lord was resurrected.

---

---

---

## The Dome:



On the altar, the dome is supported by four pillars, crowned with a cross (sign of victory) it symbolizes the Heaven of Heavens where Jesus is seated on His throne, surrounded by His angels. Jesus Christ is drawn inside this dome surrounded by His angels, as in heaven. The four pillars stand for the four Evangelists or the four corners of the world that are sometimes drawn inside these pillars.

## Consecration of the Holy Altar and its Utensils:



All of the altar's utensils along with the altar are to be consecrated by a Bishop or the Pope by anointing them with the Holy Oil during a special ceremony. Until the altar is consecrated, masses must be conducted whilst using the Holy Slate/Tablet placed on the Holy

Altar. These rules are in accordance with St. Peter's letter to St. Aklimandos (Bishop of Rome); "Every altar you build must be sealed with God's seal which is the Holy Mayroun" (Holy Oil).

**Reasons for consecrating the altar and its utensils:**

- As Jacob did when he poured oil onto the stone that he found when he slept and dreamt about the stairway to heaven, and called the place 'Bethel', which means 'The Lord's House'. (*Gen. 28:10-19*)
- God ordered Moses to prepare anointing oil (Holy Oil mixed with spices) to anoint The Tabernacle, The Covenant of the Ark, The Showbread Table, The Lamp Stand, The Incense Altar, The Altar of the Burnt Offering and The Laver (the basin for washing the hands) and all who touched them should be sanctified. (*Ex. 35:25*)
- The Church's law states that the Church should be consecrated and anointed with the Holy Oil as mentioned in the book of the Coptic Rites for these matters. The Patriarch or a Bishop prays in the presence of the priests and the congregation and Psalms 121-150 are read and incense is given then a Gospel from St. John is also read. The consecration then takes place and the mass is continued.

❖ **An opening in the east side:** it was used to hide the "Artophorion" and the "Sacred Vessels" in case of an attack on the church by the persecutors.

- ❖ **The Niche**: It is a concavity in the eastern wall of the sanctuary named: 'The Fatherly Bossom' (Hodn el-Aab). ; In it, we can find the icon of the Father the Pantocrator carrying the globe in his hands and is surrounded by angels. (*The Seraphim, The Cherubim and the Four Incorporeal creatures bearing the throne, and the 24 priests giving incense*)



**The Tribune (the stairs and the Throne)**: Seven tribune semi-circular steps in the niche behind the altar, referring to the seven orders of priesthood the Patriarch's (or Bishop's) chair is placed on the highest step. An oil lamp is lightened in front of it day and night (Akoimitos) which means the non sleeper and it resembles the star that guided the wise men to the manger where the Savior was born. Above it there is a window to let the sun light shine in as God is the Father of light. The following is written beneath this window: *'How lovely is Your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts.'* (Ps. 84:1)

---

---

---

The Iconostasis separates the Sanctuary from the Nave;



It is an icon for the heavenly Jerusalem and all the saints in it. It refers to the victorious church. The iconostasis is made of ornamented wood or marble.

It has a cross in the middle, "*you, whom before your eyes, Jesus was crucified*". There are icons of Virgin Mary at the right of the cross, John the Baptist's icon on the left, and beneath the cross an icon for the last supper.



To the right side of the person who is entering the Sanctuary, you would find an icon of our Lord Jesus Christ and on his left, there would be an icon for Virgin Mary carrying the baby Jesus on her left arm.

Altar-Curtain: it has a picture of an eye inside a triangle. The eye refers to the alerted eyes of God, and the triangle refers to the holy trinity.



There may be an ostrich egg hanged before the iconostasis, as the ostrich eyes are always fixed on its eggs during the incubation period, so as God's eyes fixed on his people.

- 
- In the olden days, churches had one altar only, but with the increase of the faithful, more than one altar is erected so that more than one mass can be served.
  - Only one mass can be served on the one altar at the one time.
  - No one has the right to enter the Sanctuary other than the Priest and the deacons who are the servants to the altar.
  - Nothing is to be offered on the altar apart from the bread and wine: substances of the Holy Sacrament.

- Cleaning of the altar is the task of the deacon only.



## 2. The Nave:

- In front of the iconostasis there is the "Chancel" which is a specific section for the deacons. It is few steps higher than the rest of the nave.

There are two "lecterns" Pulpit (Al-Mangaleya): (wooden or metal book stands) one is for the Arabic readings and one is for the Coptic readings. In Greek, the word means 'Place of the Bible'. It carries the Holy Bible and is used for reading all the relevant Church readings of the particular service. There should be two Pulpits in each church - one facing north (for reading Coptic - since Coptic was used to Praise God), and one facing south (for reading English and Arabic - since these were used to translate the Coptic language so that the Congregation would understand). The Pulpit is a symbol of Mount Sinai where Moses was given the law, so here at the Pulpit; we are given and taught the law.

---

---

---

❖ **The Nave is divided into:** a- The Chorus of the Believers.

b- The Chorus of the Catechumen.

c- The Chorus of the Penitents.



➤ There are 12 pillars in the Nave referring to the twelve disciples.

➤

➤ There are three gates in the church referring to the holy trinity :

a- The West gate.

b- The South gate.

c- The North gate.

- 
- 
- 
- **The Baptistry**: it is at the north-west of the church's nave, it has two doors, one on the west side for the



person who is getting baptized to enter from, then he goes two steps down, it symbolizes being buried with our Lord, the other door is

on the east side to exit from referring to the resurrection.

---

---

---

- **The Laqqan:**

It is a small basin sunk slightly into the floor; it is used for special prayers on water at the Epiphany, Holy Thursday and the Apostles feast.

---

---

---

---

### **The Layout of the icons in the church:**

At the centre above the main door of the Sanctuary is placed the icon of the Last Supper.

Further above the icon of the Last Supper is the icon of crucifixion.

To the left and right of the icon of the crucifixion, the icons of the 12 apostles are placed.

On the left hand side of the Iconostasis (Sanctuary Wall) - facing the congregation is the icon of Jesus Christ.

On the right hand side of the Iconostasis - facing the congregation is the icon of St. Mary.

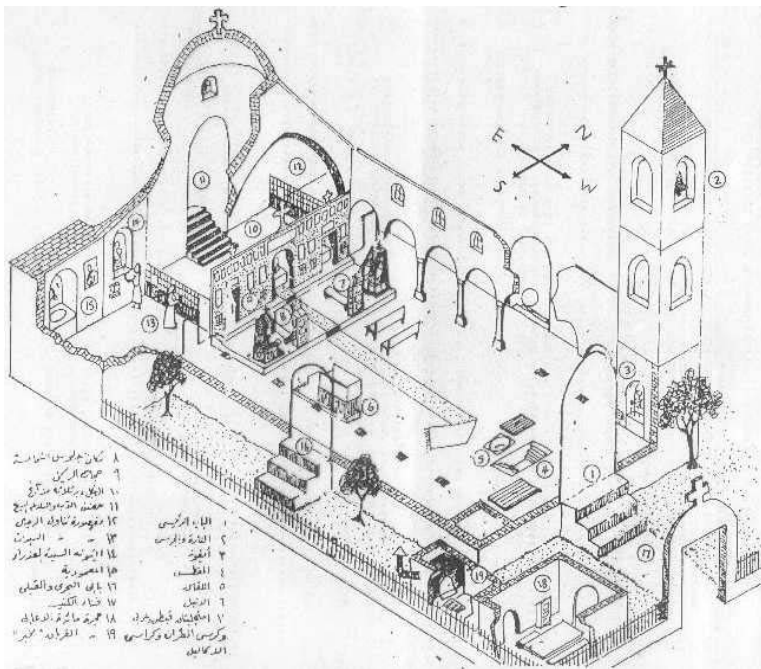
To the right of St. Mary, is the icon of Archangel Gabriel.

To the left of Jesus, is the icon of St. John the Baptist.

To the right of Archangel Gabriel, is the icon of Archangel Michael

To the left of St. John the Baptist is the icon of St. Mark.

Any remaining places may be filled with the Church Patron Saints, and/or other Saints.



## Church Utensils & Equipment

### The Holy Altar:

The location of the altar is in the middle of the sanctuary, not attached to any walls; it is an example of the tomb of Jesus or the Golgotha, where He was crucified. It is called the Holy Table, or the Lord's Table, where no slaughtered sacrifice is offered, but a live, pure non-bloody sacrifice: Jesus Christ as He was in Golgotha.

## Material of the altar:

- **Wood** : as the cross or the tree of life which was in the middle of Paradise
- **Stone** : like the tomb of Jesus
- **Precious Metal**: e.g. silver or gold as an extreme means of expressing respect to the Lord's Holy Table. Regardless of the type of material from which the altar is made, it is to be constructed like the shape of the Savior's tomb (i.e. it is not to be erected on pillars but walls with a cavity so as to accommodate relics of Saint's - See Rev. 6:9).



As

the altar holds a high standing in the Church, it is customary to cover it with dear coverings symbolizing the shroud which wrapped the most Holy Body of our Savior, upon his burial.

## The coverings of the altar are comprised of three layers:

1. Cotton or linen or silk - reaching the floor evenly on all four sides.
2. Second layer - more expensive in material and craft. The holy slate is placed between the above two layers.
3. Aprosvarin - (meaning offertory) is lifted from the altar after reconciliation prayer, which resembles the stone which was rolled away from the Holy tomb by the angel.

Bells are sewn on it so that as it is lifted, the ringing denote the earth shaking when the Lord was resurrected and to remind us of the resurrection.

- **The Holy Slate:**



Locked above the Altar, made of timber symbolizing the cross and the tree of life. It is consecrated by prayers and with the sign of the cross drawn by the holy oil on the four sides. This slate can also be made from marble to symbolize the rock from which 12 fountains sprung to quench the thirst of the 12 tribes of Judah. The cross is drawn on it, and the Greek letters Alpha and Omega (first and last) are written on it.

- **The Tabernacle (The Covenant box):**

A box made of expensive timber, decorated by holy icons with an opening at the top through which the cup is passed and securely kept. The box looks like the tabernacle of the Old Testament which contained portions of



*The Covenant Box*

- **The Gospel Book:**

It is a silver case which contains the four Gospels which used to be hand written in the Coptic and/or Arabic Language. On the casing engraved are the four Gospel writers or a picture of the Virgin St. Mary carrying the child Jesus on one side, and the Church Patron Saint on the other side. It is placed on the altar during the Holy Liturgy and is used in the prayers of The Pauline Epistle, Catholicon, The Acts and the Gospel. When a Pope or Bishop is present, then it is the Pope or Bishop who holds it symbolizing their responsibilities for the word of God.



- **The Chalice (The Cup):**

In the past it was made of wood, but it was found that it was liable to fragment with the possibility of the sacred blood seeping through the grain. It was developed to glass or crystal which was breakable, then was changed to thick clayware or copper but silver was prevalent. It is a medium size cup, it has a bell-shaped form, and it is sitting on a long stem that ends with a rounded base. It is made of silver; The Lord Christ used a chalice when He instituted the sacrament of Eucharist in the night of last supper.



*The Chalice*

- **The Tray (Paten):**

The tray symbolizes the manger. The round shape also symbolizes the sun where the Lord took his residence (Ps. 18:9), and that God has no beginning and no end. The tray was not mentioned as part of the writings of the Evangelists about the Passover night, but it was written that Jesus placed the bread in his holy hands. The church thought it more appropriate to use the tray because the long duration of the mass and the impracticability of the priest holding the sacred body for the duration of the mass.



*The Plate*

- **The Star:**

Two intersectional curved strips forming a dome to be placed on the tray, symbolizes the star that shone over the manger where Jesus lay.



*The Star*

- **The Spoon (Mastyre):**

The spoon reminds us of the Seraph who held the ember and touched the lips of Isaiah for purification. (See Rev. 8:3-4) It is half spherical in shape. It is used to administer the precious blood. It was first used in the sixth century.



*The Spoon*

- **The Vessel of the Eucharist, The Eucharist box (the treasure box, or Ciborium):**

It is a small rounded box. It is used to carry the holy sacraments to be administered to the sick and elders who are unable to come to the church to receive the communion.

For this procedure to be performed; both the priest and the person who is receiving the Sacraments have to be fasting. The treasure box is placed next to the throne with a lit candle next to them.

- **The Cruets:**



These are small glass vessels two of which are used to carry the water and the wine that are poured into the cup after the offertory bread is chosen. The Mayroun (Holy Oil) is placed in a cruet which is kept in the Sanctuary so that it could be used in Baptism. A cruet is used also for the Holy Oil called 'Ghaliloan' used in the prayer for Baptism. In addition there is also the cruet for the oil of the Apocalypse (The eve of Joyous

Saturday). Finally a cruet is used to carry the oil for the 'Unction of the sick', which is used to anoint the sick and those desiring to be blessed by it (James 5:4). At the end of the Holy Liturgy, the deacon has to thoroughly dry all the altar utensils that come into contact with the Holy Eucharist on that day. Then they are all wrapped together with a square shaped cloth and tied with five knots. The first three knots are for the Holy Trinity, and the final two are for the Glory and Honor to the Holy Trinity.

- **The Censer (Shorya):**

It is made of metal. The censer as a whole is a symbol of Virgin Mary who carried the Divine God in the flesh in her womb. It also refers to the Holy Trinity. The incense represents the rising prayers of the Saints.



### **The Censor**

- It has three chains of equal length, symbolizing the Holy Trinity. They are connected at the top symbolizing the oneness of the divine essence. The upper dome of the censer symbolizes heaven. The hanger symbolizes Christ, who humbled himself and descended to the world for the sake of our redemption.
- The concave portion of the censer (the bottom section) symbolizes the womb of the Virgin St. Mary that carried the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Charcoal symbolizes the human nature and the fire is the symbol of the divine nature of Christ
- Frankincense symbolizes the gifts of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus, and also the perfumes that Joseph and Nicodemus anointed the sacred body of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- The centre dome symbolizes the power of the Almighty God which overshadowed the Virgin St. Mary during the Immaculate Conception.
- The bells are present to remind the congregation of good deeds and also to serve as a reminder of those who trespassed the priesthood of Aaron and were punished by a plague, when death did not relent its grip until Moses passed with frankincense among the living and the dead. For this reason, the church dictates frankincense for the dead (for mercy) and for the living (for deliverance).
- The burning of the incense represents the pains of the Lord; the aromatic scent symbolizes the blessings obtained through the suffering of the Lord.
- The rising of the incense from the censer symbolizes the prayers of the saints ascending to heaven.

- **The Incense holder:**

Made of carved wood, ivory or silver/gold, used to hold the incense. It is always placed on the altar during the service.



- **The Cymbals & The Triangles:**

Instruments of praise to add to the joy of hymns in the Church (Ps. 150).



- **Candlesticks (or lamp stands):**

Two on the altar to represent the two angels who guarded Jesus as He lay in the tomb, one at His head, and the other at His feet.

- **The Cross:**

The cross in Greek is named 'Stavros', and in Coptic is named 'Khash' or 'She'. The priest holds it in his hands during prayers as a weapon against evil (Ps. 44:5, Is. 59:17). It represents the angels that led the children of Israel in the wilderness, and the Archangel Michael who appeared to Joshua with a sword in his hand, it also denotes the Bishop or priests representation of Christ. When the Bishop or priest presents the cross to the congregation to be kissed, it symbolizes kissing the Crucified

Himself. When the priest receives the new cross from the Bishop or Pope during ordination, it symbolizes the authority given to him from God. The cross is raised in the sanctuary during the Holy Liturgy symbolizing Christ being raised on the cross. Banners are also fixed on the cross, which are situated inside the sanctuary depicting spiritual images such as Parish Saints. The deacon during festive processions carries these crosses. The deacon carries the bronze serpent on a metallic or golden stick (with a small cross on top) which is placed in the sanctuary next to the Patriarch or carried by a deacon. This symbolizes the raising of Jesus Christ on the cross. Around this cross is a red cloth representing, the Blood of Jesus Christ that was shed on the cross on our behalf.

### *Types of Crosses:*

- The Coptic Cross - each end comprises of three sides, representing the Holy Trinity. The total of the ends adds to 12, the number of the disciples.
- The Coptic Cross - also adopted by the Greek Orthodox Church.
- The Greek & Russian Orthodox Cross - who believe that two cross-sectional pieces of timber were added to the cross - one to tie the head, and the other for the feet?
- Floor Cross - is also Orthodox and symbolizes the spread of blessings through to the four corners of the earth.
- Latin cross - Peculiar to Jerusalem. It is pentagonal, symbolizing the numbers of the crusaders who came to the rescue of Jerusalem.
- Byzantine Cross - complies with the Orthodox teachings and is present in some of the screens of Coptic churches.
- Nature Cross - This cross indicates two natures in the Lord - it agrees with the teachings of the Greeks and the Latin.

- The Liturgical Fans:

They are used to keep the flying bugs away from the Sacraments during liturgy.

- The Holy Myron's Container:

It is used after the baptism during the confirmation sacrament.

- The Ewer and the Basin:



The priest uses them to wash his hands during the liturgy service.

---

---

---

### Consecration of the Holy Altar and its Utensils:



All of the altar's utensils along with the altar are to be consecrated by a Bishop or the Pope by anointing them with the Holy Oil during a special

ceremony. Until the altar is consecrated, masses must be conducted whilst using the Holy Slate/Tablet placed on the Holy Altar. These rules are in accordance with St. Peter's letter to St. Aklimandos (Bishop of Rome); "Every altar you build must be sealed with God's seal which is the Holy Mayroun" (Holy Oil).

***Reasons for consecrating the altar and its utensils:***

- As Jacob did when he poured oil onto the stone that he found when he slept and dreamt about the stairway to heaven, and called the place 'Bethel', which means 'The Lord's House'. (*Gen. 28:10-19*)
  - God ordered Moses to prepare anointing oil (Holy Oil mixed with spices) to anoint The Tabernacle, The Covenant of the Ark, The Showbread Table, The Lamp Stand, The Incense Altar, The Altar of the Burnt Offering and The Laver (the basin for washing the hands) and all who touched them should be sanctified. (*Ex. 35:25*)
  - The Church's law states that the Church should be consecrated and anointed with the Holy Oil as mentioned in the book of the Coptic Rites for these matters. The Patriarch or a Bishop prays in the presence of the priests and the congregation and Psalms 121-150 are read and incense is given then a Gospel from St. John are also read. The consecration then takes place and the mass is continued.
- 

St Marina Coptic Orthodox Church

St Demiana & St Athanasius Coptic Orthodox Church