

Cathedrals: Monuments to Faith

What makes one city different from another? Today, we build stadiums, arches, zoos, and statues for people to see. In the Middle Ages, city leaders also wanted to make their city outstanding. The two ways this was done was by building a magnificent cathedral and a university.

The cathedral was the home church for the bishop or archbishop. It had a special chair for the bishop called a *cathedra*. The early cathedrals were built like the Greek and Roman temples; the structure was as simple as when a child lays a block across two upright blocks. Around the 11th century, the Romanesque style of cathedral came in. It was made of stone, had thick walls, narrow openings for light, and rounded arches. The statues in them had to follow guidelines set down by the church, and no sculptor could show any originality in design.

During the 13th century, the Gothic style cathedral became very popular in Germany, France, and England. It was spectacular in size, height, and design. Its walls were heavier than any previously constructed; to keep them from collapsing outward, they were supported by flying buttresses. Crowning the work were the steeples and spires, like arrows pointing to heaven. Doors and windows were pointed too, like hands at prayer. The glaziers (glass makers) used translucent glass of many colors, each color significant in meaning. Everything that was done had a symbolic meaning.

The Gothic cathedral was usually shaped like a large cross. A visitor entered through the large doors at the front into the narthex (inside entrance) located on the west side of the cathedral and walked down the nave toward the altar. About halfway down the nave, the visitor saw the arms of the cross (transepts) off to the north and south. Walking straight to the east, the visitor came to the apse, where the choir and altar were.

Cathedrals often took 50 to 100 years to build, and thousands of individuals played a part in their construction. Many volunteered out of community pride and because of religious enthusiasm. Others were paid. The unskilled workers received low wages for the very hard work of cutting stones, moving them to the building site, and setting them in place. Masons cut the stone into just the right size and shape to fit their spot in the building, and the best masons made the statues. Masons were well paid when they were employed. Becoming a mason required seven years of apprenticeship and passing a test. There was always a shortage of masons, partly because those who had the rank did not want too many competitors, and also because so many died of lung diseases caused by the stone dust they breathed.

Most of the great cathedrals built during the Middle Ages still stand, and only war and fire destroyed the others. Experts are divided over which is the greatest. When you enter these massive structures, you see the pride and devotion to detail that made them monuments to faith.

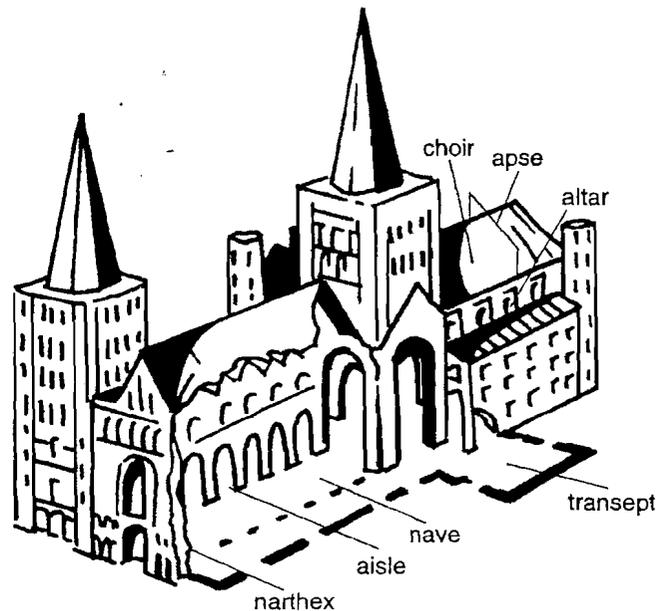


Diagram of a typical cathedral.

Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. Where did the name "cathedral" come from?

2. What style used thick walls and rounded arches?

3. How were the walls supported?

4. What was the shape of the door meant to represent?

5. What were the glass makers called?

6. What part of the cathedral was pointed from west to east?

7. What part was pointed north to south?

8. What part included the altar and choir?

9. How long did it take to become a stone mason?

10. Why were there shortages of stone masons?
