

The Sacred Images of St. Barbara

A Guide to the Iconography of St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Durham, NC



Presented by Southpoint Access

Introduction

The sacred art of iconography at St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church in South Durham is not only beautiful but profoundly theological. These images serve as windows to heaven—intended not just to be admired but to teach, guide, and inspire the faithful.

This guide walks you through the iconography found within the church, from the soaring Pantocrator in the dome to the richly symbolic icons of the altar, transepts, and sanctuary walls. Each image has been thoughtfully selected and placed to enhance the worship experience and illuminate the truths of the Orthodox Christian faith.

As you read, you'll find spiritual commentary, historical context, and traditional interpretations of each icon, rooted in Scripture and the early Church. We invite you to journey through the church's iconography and discover a sacred world rendered in color and form.

The Dome: Christ the Pantocrator and the Evangelists

At the very heart of Orthodox iconography is the image of **Christ Pantocrator** - Christ the Almighty - who reigns from the highest point in the church's architecture, the dome.

Christ Pantocrator

The image of Christ in the dome is a visual proclamation of His divine authority. Surrounding His image are inscriptions drawn from the books of Revelation and Isaiah:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Rev. 22:13, Rev. 1:8)

"Before me there was no other God... I have created the earth, and created man upon it." (Isaiah 43:10, 45:12)

Key elements of the Pantocrator icon include:

- A frontal depiction of Christ, emphasizing His omniscience.
- A golden background, symbolizing eternity and divine light.
- A blessing hand, often formed to symbolize the Holy Trinity.
- A Gospel book, representing Christ as the eternal Word.

The Four Evangelists

Supporting the dome are four pendentives, each bearing the image of one of the Gospel writers:

- **Matthew** (front left) and **John** (front right), who were among the original Twelve Apostles.
- **Mark** and **Luke** (rear left and right), who were among the Seventy Apostles.

Surrounding them are 13 medallions depicting Old Testament figures such as Enoch, Abraham, Job, and Tobit, and above them, 12 prophets and kings—among them Noah, David, and Isaiah—who point to Christ's coming.

Each Evangelist has the first words of the Gospel attributed to him in each depiction. This highlights their historical background and theological contribution.

The East Wall

The Ceiling Over the Altar

The Virgin Mary – Platytera ton Ouranon

Directly behind the altar stands the majestic image of the **Platytera ton Ouranon**, meaning *“More Spacious than the Heavens.”* This traditional icon depicts the Theotokos (Mother of God) in an orans (prayerful) position, with Christ the child at her center.

She is not just the bearer of Jesus—she is the temple who carried God Himself. As foretold in Isaiah:

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

In iconography, this image reminds the faithful that Mary has become the living Ark of the New Covenant, housing the Word of God in her womb. Her presence above the altar reinforces her role as an intercessor for all believers.

The Ascension of Christ

This icon captures the moment from Acts 1:9–11, when Christ ascends into heaven in glory. Mary stands calmly below, flanked by two angels, while the Apostles look upward in confusion.

- Mary does not gaze into the heavens. Her eyes look outward, toward us—peaceful and prayerful—because she understands the divine mystery unfolding.
- The Apostles, in contrast, gesture and question. Even after Christ’s teachings, they still wonder: *“Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?”*
- Mountains in the icon represent the meeting place between heaven and earth.
- The mandorla, a radiating almond-shaped halo, envelops Christ as He ascends.

This icon reveals two worlds: the stillness of divine knowledge in Mary and the unrest of earthly reason in the Apostles.

The Ceiling Over the Solea

Pentecost

The *Pentecost* icon shows the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles. Unlike Western depictions full of fire and drama, this icon is serene and ordered.

- The Apostles sit in harmony around a semicircle.
- Peter and Paul, placed most prominently, are emphasized as leaders, though shown as equals among the Twelve.
- The *inverse perspective* of the iconography makes the figures closer to the viewer larger—a theological reversal from natural perspective, emphasizing proximity to spiritual truth over visual realism.
- The architecture in the background symbolizes the Tower of Babel—a reference to humanity’s failed attempt to reach God. Pentecost, by contrast, shows God reaching down to unify all people through His Spirit.

The Nativity of Christ

This icon integrates visual theology with ancient Christian tradition.

- Christ lies wrapped in burial cloths, a reference to His future Passion and death.
- The cave in which He is born parallels the tomb, revealing the full arc of His earthly mission.
- Mary, though beside Him, does not gaze at Christ. She looks instead to Joseph, whose thoughts are troubled, shown being tempted by a devil disguised as an old shepherd.
- Above, the star shines as a divine spotlight, pointing from heaven to the Christ child.
- Magi, angels, and shepherds complete the image of universal adoration.
- Even nature responds—with animals and landscapes that guide our eyes toward the infant Savior.

The South Transept

The Transfiguration of Christ

The icon of the Transfiguration represents one of the most profound moments in Christ's ministry—His divine nature revealed in radiant glory before His closest disciples (Matthew 17:1–9).

At the center of the icon:

- Christ stands atop Mount Tabor, clothed in dazzling white, enclosed in a mandorla representing divine light.
- His **right hand blesses**, while His **left hand holds a scroll**, symbolizing His teaching authority and the Gospel.

Beside Him:

- Moses, representing the Law, stands with a scroll.
- Elijah, representing the Prophets, appears on Christ's right side—the same position John the Baptist holds in the icon of the Theophany, linking these great revelations of the Trinity.

Below Him:

- Peter kneels, gesturing and speaking, overwhelmed by the vision.
- James, overcome, has fallen backward shielding his face.
- John, prone beneath Christ, foreshadows his place beneath the cross during the Crucifixion.

This icon reminds us that even a glimpse of divine glory is transformative. It prepared the disciples—and prepares us—for the suffering of the Cross by revealing the Resurrection's radiance ahead of time.

Saints of the South Transept (Left to Right)

A line of saints adorns the lower South Transept wall, each chosen for their powerful witness and deep connection to Orthodox tradition:

1. **St. Nicholas** – Known for his generosity, justice, and defense of orthodoxy at the First Ecumenical Council. His legacy inspires love for the poor and the truth.
2. **St. Demetrios** – The military martyr of Thessaloniki, known for his courage and the miracle involving his companion Nestor defeating the gladiator Lyaeus.
3. **St. George** – The soldier-saint who boldly confessed Christ before the emperor Diocletian and endured brutal martyrdom.
4. **Ss. Peter and Paul** – Representing unity in diversity: Peter, the unlearned fisherman turned bold preacher; Paul, the scholarly Pharisee turned apostle to the nations.
5. **St. Sarah** – A matriarch of faith, revered in the Eastern tradition (contextually more information may be needed; possibly linked to St. Sarah of the Desert).
6. **St. Spyridon** – A humble shepherd and bishop, known for miraculous acts and defending orthodoxy at the First Ecumenical Council.
7. **St. Theodora** – Traditionally depicted as a Byzantine empress and protector of icons during the era of iconoclasm.

The North Transept

The Resurrection of Christ (Anastasis)

At the top of the North Transept is the glorious icon of the Resurrection, often referred to in the Orthodox tradition as the *Anastasis*. This image doesn't depict the moment Christ exits the tomb, but rather His descent into Hades, where He proclaims victory over death and raises Adam and Eve from their graves.

In this icon:

- Christ stands in radiant garments, surrounded by a mandorla, often with a dynamic pose pulling Adam and Eve by the wrist—a symbolic gesture showing His divine initiative in our salvation.
- The broken gates of Hades lie beneath His feet, along with shattered locks, keys, and chains.
- Kings, prophets, and the righteous from the Old Testament stand to either side—among them David, Solomon, and John the Forerunner (the Baptist), who prepared the way even in death.

This icon conveys the universal power of Christ's resurrection—it is not only a historical event but a cosmic one, undoing the curse of death for all humanity.

Saints of the North Transept (Left to Right)

The line of saints beneath the Resurrection continues the visual litany of holy witnesses. Their lives, though diverse in time and background, all point toward the triumph of faith:

1. **St. Sophia** – A Christian mother in 2nd-century Rome who endured the martyrdom of her three daughters—Faith, Hope, and Agape—before dying herself beside their graves. A testament to unwavering faith in suffering.
2. **St. Thekla** – The first female martyr and Equal-to-the-Apostles. After hearing St. Paul preach, she abandoned marriage, survived multiple execution attempts, and lived her life in missionary service.
3. **St. Nektarios of Aegina** – A 20th-century bishop beloved for his humility, miracles, and teaching. Wrongfully exiled from Egypt, he found peace and holiness on the island of Aegina, where his relics continue to heal the faithful.
4. **St. Phanourios** – Known as the revealer of lost things—both physical and spiritual. Tradition holds that baking and blessing the *Phanourópita* (a special cake) in his honor is a faithful response to his assistance.

Each of these saints stands as a spiritual companion to those who enter the church. Their presence reminds us that holiness is not confined to one era or place—it is the eternal vocation of all believers.

The Altar and Sanctuary Icons

The sanctuary is the most sacred part of the church, reserved for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. The iconography here reflects both the heavenly reality of Christ's eternal priesthood and the spiritual ancestry of the Church.

Saints of the Altar Interior

A semicircle of saints adorns the inner altar space, visible primarily to clergy and altar servers but representing the ever-present cloud of witnesses who surround the Holy Table.

These figures include:

- Fathers of the Church, such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great, who authored the liturgies used to this day.
- Angelic hosts, shown in reverent attendance, emphasize the heavenly nature of every liturgical celebration.

Together, they form a visual doxology, turning the sanctuary into a representation of the *heavenly altar* described in Revelation.

The Icon of the Dormition (Falling Asleep) of the Theotokos

Placed prominently in this space is the icon of the Dormition, or “falling asleep,” of the Virgin Mary—a feast that teaches both the sanctity of her life and the hope of the bodily resurrection.

- Mary lies on her funeral bier, surrounded by grieving apostles and early bishops.
- Christ, in divine glory, stands at the center, holding a small white-clothed figure—the soul of His mother.
- Above, the gates of heaven are open, ready to receive her.

The icon reveals the Orthodox teaching that Mary, having completed her earthly life, was taken—body and soul—into heaven. It is a visual proclamation of *resurrection hope* for all believers.

The Icon of the Theophany (Baptism of Christ)

The Theophany icon depicts the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by St. John the Baptist and contains layers of theological meaning:

- Christ stands in the river, naked or nearly so—not in shame, but to restore the innocence lost by Adam.
- The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends in a mandorla, and God the Father's voice echoes from heaven: *“This is my beloved Son...”*
- Angels wait on the riverbank with towels to serve the Savior.
- Strange river creatures below flee His presence, echoing Psalmic language: *“The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back.”*

This is not just the baptism of Christ—it is the sanctification of all creation.

Icons of the Nativity of Christ and Pentecost (Revisited)

Opposite one another in the apse:

- The **Nativity** icon reveals Christ as both infant and sacrificial lamb, wrapped in swaddling clothes resembling burial cloths, resting in a manger-cave that mirrors His future tomb.
- The **Pentecost** icon, by contrast, shows the Church birthed through the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, seated in harmony, united in divine wisdom.

Together, they express the entire arc of the Incarnation: from Christ's birth into the world to the Spirit's birth into the Church.

The Back Wall of the Church

This wall faces the entrance and is often the last sight seen upon leaving the sanctuary—a reminder that the Church’s mission continues beyond its walls. Here, we encounter two striking female saints:

Left Icon: St. Sophia and Her Three Daughters

This icon is one of the most emotionally powerful depictions in the church. It honors **St. Sophia**, a Christian mother in 2nd-century Rome, and her daughters: **Faith, Hope, and Agape** (Greek for Love).

- Sophia was widowed and raised her daughters in the Christian faith during a time of intense Roman persecution.
- When arrested, she pleaded with the court to spare her daughters by offering her own life. Instead, the daughters were tortured and martyred before her eyes—ages 12, 10, and 9.
- After burying them, she remained in prayer at their graveside for three days before surrendering her own soul to God.

This icon is a striking image of **sacrificial faith, parental love**, and the conviction that life in Christ transcends death. It calls us to courage, steadfastness, and spiritual legacy.

Right Icon: St. Thekla, Equal to the Apostles

St. Thekla was a noblewoman of Iconium who heard St. Paul preach and immediately resolved to follow Christ. She broke off her engagement, defied her mother and Roman authorities, and faced martyrdom multiple times:

- She survived being burned alive, thrown to wild beasts, and drowned—each time miraculously delivered.
- Eventually, she became a missionary and ascetic, living out her days in prayer and healing.

Her title “**Equal to the Apostles**” reflects her evangelistic zeal and boldness in a time when women rarely had religious leadership roles.

The South Side Wall

Left Icon: St. Nektarios of Aegina

A modern saint beloved by Orthodox Christians worldwide, **St. Nektarios** (1846–1920) was a humble bishop known for:

- His unwavering humility amid slander and false accusations.
- Founding a convent on Aegina, where he performed miracles and offered spiritual guidance.
- Healing many—especially those with cancer—both in life and after his repose.

Nektarios’ presence in the church reminds us that **holiness is not distant or mythic**, but possible even in our own era through faith and endurance.

Right Icon: St. Phanourios

Often called the “Revealer of Lost Things,” St. Phanourios is known for assisting those seeking:

- Lost items
- Lost faith or direction
- Answers to prayers related to illness, decisions, or uncertainty

It is customary to bake a **Phanouropita** (a sweet offering bread) in thanksgiving for his help and bring it to church to be blessed.

Phanourios’ icon teaches that God’s care extends to the small and personal, and that even when we feel spiritually lost, guidance is always available through prayer.

With this, we conclude the walk through the iconographic program of St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church. From the cosmic vision of Christ in the dome to the intimate icons of modern saints, every surface speaks of God's story unfolding through history, Scripture, and the lives of the faithful.

About This Guide

This booklet was lovingly prepared by **Southpoint Access**, a neighborhood news source dedicated to the people, places, and stories of South Durham, North Carolina.

Our mission is to inform, connect, and celebrate the communities we serve—whether through hyperlocal journalism, features on neighborhood life, or supporting local institutions like St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church.

The iconography featured in this guide was masterfully created by iconographer **Aristidis Kovaci**, whose work brings the sacred stories of our faith vividly to life.

We gratefully acknowledge parishioner **Nick Bourbous**, whose generous contribution made this project possible. His support, along with the prayers and dedication of the St. Barbara community, has given lasting beauty to the sanctuary and to all who enter it.

To learn more about *Southpoint Access*, visit:

 southpointaccess.news

Southpoint Access - Locally rooted. Community focused.