

The Place for Adult Baptism ...

as an Invitation to the Orthodox Church

by Christ J. Kamages, AIA



Figure 1. Sponsor Nikki with Catechumen Ian on the soleas with "Baptistry Kiddie Pool" in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."



Figure 2. The separate Baptistery of the 6th century Church of Ekatontaplioni on the Island of Paros, Greece.

The decision of an adult catechumen to follow the path of Orthodoxy through the sign and seal of Holy Baptism is a huge and awesome threshold in one's life. For those who require it, the importance of baptism in the life and discipleship of the believer mustn't be minimized or trivialized. Although the Sacrament still assumes an adult being baptized, for centuries the demographic and cultural perspective of Orthodox Baptism has focused on infants. Because of this, our parishes today are often ill equipped to deal with the phenomenon of adults seeking the faith and requiring baptism. As the pinnacle of transformation, the environment surrounding this sacrament must represent a beautiful, sacred event...not an episode of divine comedy as witnessed in the wonderful movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" when Ian (the catechumen), assisted by his Godmother, cousin Nikki, was baptized in a child's swimming pool placed on the Church's soleas (Fig. 1). Certainly it's a memorable "snapshot" but not where we want to be in practice.

In the early Church, baptisteries were an important structure. Being a separate building from the church complex, the baptistery was decorated with iconography and graced with beautiful architecture in its own right. Even today, we marvel at the beauty of ancient Byzantine baptisteries like Ekatontaplioni in Paros (Fig. 2) and the Orthodox Baptistery in Ravenna (Fig. 3).

So when considering the inclusion of an adult baptistery in a church structure today, we should ask, "what are the special needs of adult baptisms today...and what are the special needs and considerations that must be considered in the planning, design and implementation of an appropriate place and setting for adult baptisms?" In our experience, one must consider the following rudimental issues:

- Enhancement and preservation of the sacrament as an event of dignity and celebration.
- Location of the baptistery in relationship to the Church Naos (a part of...or separate) to the infant font and dressing area and providing a position of focus and dignity.
- Functionality of entry, exit, area around and the relationship of the priest to the catechumen in anthropometric terms.
- Technical considerations like water flow/control, heating, disposal to the holy drywell.

Today 85% of our Church Temple designs include beautiful, dignified and functional Adult Baptisteries (Figs. 4 & 5). These areas, beyond serving as the appropriate portal or gateway for the catechumen, most importantly serve as a solid, permanent icon of the Orthodox Faith's commitment and invitation to all who seek the True Faith.

Christ John Kamages AIA, MArch, is President of CJK Design Group, a San Francisco based planning and architecture firm with a national practice focused on faith communities (over 100 past and 20 current projects.) Mr. Kamages has authored many articles and is a sought after speaker on the subject of Orthodox rooted architecture. In November 2000, he was honored by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, with the Offikion of Archon Arketekton. He serves as Chairman of the Board for the Patriarch Athenagoras Institute at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley.



Figure 3. *The Orthodox Baptistry in Ravenna, Italy.*



Figure 4. *The Baptistry Niche in St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church in Saco, Maine.*

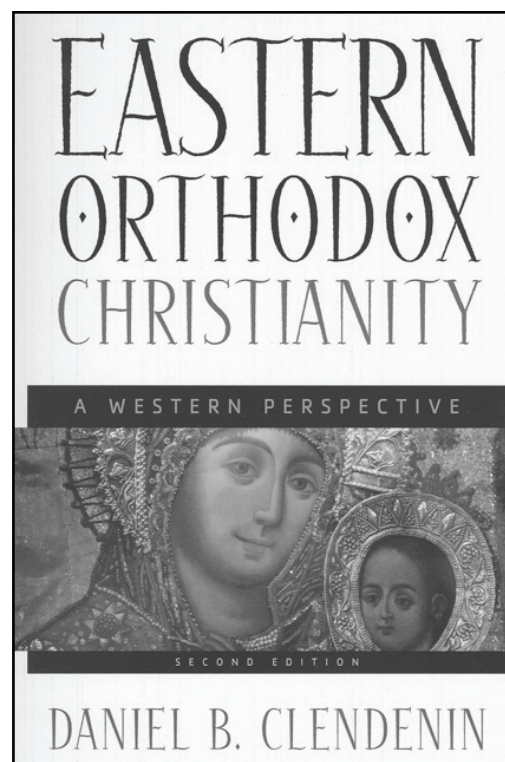


Figure 5. *The Baptistry excedra at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church, Las Vegas, which combines Adult and Infant Baptismal. Seven out of the last 36 baptisms at St. John the Baptist were of an adult.*

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