

# BYZANTINE CHURCHES OF ALBERTA



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Cover  
Exterior  
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Craigend, 1975

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BYZANTINE CHURCHES OF ALBERTA  
Photographs by Orest Semchishen

Edited by Hubert Hohn  
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Orest Semchishen



## FOREWORD

One of the most striking features of the Alberta landscape, particularly in the region northeast of Edmonton, is the prevalence of Eastern Rite churches. These structures, with their characteristic onion-shaped domes, were built during the first decades of this century in small agricultural settlements where the limitations of available skills and materials resulted in a transformation of Old World Byzantine style into what Orest Semchishen has described as “a warm and appealing folk architecture which displays a rich diversity of expression in both form and detail.” Now frequently abandoned as population shifts toward urban centres, these churches continue to evoke the presence of a remote but enduring religious past from which settlers far from their homeland once derived the spiritual strength to sustain the hardships of their early years on the prairie.

It is to the credit of Semchishen that he succeeds in using his camera to highlight the spirit, significance and beauty of this unique facet of the pioneer religious experience in Alberta. To salute this religious tradition and to give it new life is a formidable task requiring the touch and sensitivity of an artist whose love is powerful enough to transform his rediscovery of the past into a record that is alive and meaningful for us today. Though the record will become even more valuable in time, the photographs assembled here are already of immense importance as historical documents, for in some cases the structures and interiors photographed no longer exist. Yet the images offer more than factual documentation, for in every instance, Semchishen perceives his subject with serene reverence and a measured amount of well-placed nostalgia, embedding historical facts within the context of his own feeling. Through this poetic texture, Semchishen quietly reveals the depth of his personal commitment to his subject and his concern for its preservation. This wordless, yet uniquely eloquent attachment to his heritage sets apart the work of Semchishen as a statement that warrants our special attention and praise.

Robert B. Klymasz, *Senior Co-ordinator*  
*Slavic and East European Programme*  
*Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies*  
*National Museum of Man*



## INTRODUCTION

Orest Semchishen's photographic study of Eastern Rite churches in Alberta was carried out between the spring of 1973 and the fall of 1975. Nearly 1000 view camera negatives of more than 250 churches were made during this period. Although the importance of Semchishen's work as historical record is evident, his photographs also belong to the tradition of documentary photography and must be evaluated as such. However, valid assessment is difficult without an accurate conception of what is meant by "documentary photography."

A photograph is both a record of light falling on subject matter, and a two-dimensional graphic figure bounded by a frame. Each of these aspects gives rise to a different aesthetic orientation toward the medium. The "documentary" approach emphasizes the recording aspect, consigning the graphic to a purely supportive role. The graphic aspect is emphasized by the "pictorial" approach, which employs photographic techniques but strives toward a picture which is considered to be "art" by standards of conventional taste.

Within the context of still photography, the meaning of "documentary" is not entirely clear. Often, the term broadly refers to photographs of human society. A useful vocabulary for the discussion of quality in documentary photography cannot be derived from such an inclusive category, for it makes no fine distinctions between differing aesthetic directions.

The term is also used to designate photography which is committed to social reform. Although thinking of "documentary photography" as a specific approach is critically more useful than thinking of it as a subject category, the advancement of social reform is hardly a basis for aesthetic evaluation. The value of such photography is indissolubly linked to a specific social, economic and political climate, and unless the work succeeds on more purely aesthetic levels, it loses its value as this climate changes.

The term "documentary" is more meaningfully applied to straightforward use of the recording aspect of photography, regardless of the kind of subject matter. The *Heritage Illustrated Dictionary* defines "documentary" as "Presenting facts objectively and without editorializing and inserting fictional matter . . ." Although this is an acceptable starting point for critical discussion, it does not

allow for the aesthetic expression which inevitably occurs when a photographer is fully aware of the possibilities and limitations of his medium. Given this awareness, the essence of the documentary approach is clear presentation of disinterested experience of subject matter. This experience is impartial, serving neither the photographer's self-interest nor the established conventions of his medium. Subject matter is perceived for its own sake. The objective facts remain important, but only as one element of the whole photographic experience. If presentation of experience is to be clear and unified, fact must be balanced with feeling and the perception of form. The documentary approach strives toward use of all of these elements in a way that is consistent with the inherently recording nature of the medium.

A genuine appreciation for factual information lends substance to the documentary approach, for it ensures that the singular nature of the subject matter is clearly recognized. The illusionistic photographic image is only convincing when objective facts are clearly and directly presented. If the sense of concrete reality is not convincing, time reveals the photograph to be nothing more than a vestige of self-indulgent aestheticism. A lack of awareness of the factual nature of the subject matter precludes immediacy of perception, resulting in sentimental or pictorial photography; while on the other hand, overemphasis of visible fact to the exclusion of feeling and form reduces the photograph to an incoherent reproduction of external appearance.

Although the word "documentary" implies a dry factual record, a documentary photograph which retains its significance through time must embody feeling which arises as a quality of the subject matter in the course of disinterested experience. The feeling consistent with the documentary approach is dispassionate: it is unbiased, calm, and free of sentimentality. The documentary photograph does not present emotions imposed upon the subject by the photographer, but emotion which has been impressed upon his sensibilities by the subject matter itself. This emotion permeates the photograph without calling attention to itself, leaving the viewer free to develop his own emotional response to the subject matter presented. Without dispassionate feeling, the photograph is merely a descriptive record, and although such a record may have pictorial appeal, it will be powerless to evoke an enlivened sense of the subject.

The documentary approach also requires a subtle and natural sense of form whose primary function is single-minded recognition of the intrinsic visual complexities which reveal the subject matter to be entirely and precisely what it is. Original form is recognized in each subject, and the

photographic frame is applied and adjusted until an equivalent form is felt as the image. It is not anticipated, planned, shaped, or synthesized, but is discovered form which is self-contained, self-sufficient, and unobscured by imposition of pictorial conventions or personal style.

Documentary unity is realized when disinterested experience accepts visual disparities and perceives an inseparable identity of objective fact, dispassionate feeling, and intrinsic form within the variety and complexity of its subject matter.

## II

An important change of vision is apparent in Orest Semchishen's study of Eastern Rite churches. His early work on this project reflects a self-conscious pictorialism similar to that which is evident in the photographs of Victorian architecture made by the American photographer, Walker Evans, in 1931. By 1975, Semchishen's best work was closer to the self-restrained plainness and authenticity which Evans achieved in many of his photographs of the American South in 1935 and 1936. Although there is still an occasional tendency toward pictorialism in some of Semchishen's best work, his most recent photographs suggest that he is moving toward a more rigorous austerity of vision.

Semchishen's early photographs of church interiors are primarily head-on views of surfaces, geometrically locked into the picture rectangle and removed from the context of a larger architectural space. His exteriors of the same period are often limited to simple rectangular arrangements of isolated architectural details. When whole churches are presented, they are conceived as flat shapes and cropped to exclude the visual complexities of the surrounding environment. When a setting is included, space is used around objects to produce simple figure-ground configurations, but the actual volume and substance of spatial intervals is rarely felt. Organization is safe, familiar, and overly balanced, rendering the surface pattern impenetrable, and preventing an effective illusion of deep space. Characteristic qualities of place are seldom adequately discovered, due to an inability to accept the commonplace or "obvious" reality of subject matter as sufficient statement in itself. This mannered approach, often embellished through dramatic lighting, deepened tones, and heightened contrast, undermines his documentary intent.

In the spring of 1974 Semchishen realized that he was losing the individual character of the churches by excluding their settings, and that a more expansive presentation was required to identify them accurately. As a result, he backed away from the primary object being photographed. Moving back provided necessary factual information, introduced more challenging aesthetic problems, and above all, shifted attention from the surface pattern of the photograph to the reality of the subject.

Comparison of Plates 1 and 2 reveals the importance of this simple change of position. Plate 1 combines elements of Semchishen's earlier pictorialism with his evolving documentary approach. In a photograph of the same church made the year before, he used a vertical format, trimming the borders close to the sides of the church. The presentation is looser in the horizontal format of the newer photograph, but he still nearly fills the rectangle vertically and achieves a tasteful asymmetric balance of all the visual elements, graphically locking the whole pattern into the rectangle. The close frontal position of the camera compresses the volume of the church and pulls it into or just behind the surface of the photograph, where it stands like a billboard in front of its setting. The narrow band of foreground appears to drop vertically away from the base of the church, creating a definite separation between the viewer and the picture surface. It is difficult to break through this rigidly structured surface to experience the photograph as an illusionistic reference to real space.

In Plate 2, moving the camera position back from the church extends the foreground toward the viewer, moving him through the photographic surface and into the presence of the church. The church is not positioned in a surface pattern, but is recessed into the space of its setting. This opening of the surface and deepening of space is partially achieved by centering the church within the image. With the position of the center axis predetermined, absolute pictorial balance is effectively prevented, for what is present toward the edges of the photograph is determined by the order within the setting and not by the photographer. When the subject matter meets the rectangle in an arbitrary way, structural tension across the surface is shattered and the photograph becomes transparent. A frontal approach is not always effective, for it can destroy the volume of the primary object, but in this instance the volume is suggested by the shadow cast along the side of the building, and by the protruding rear entrances which locate the back of the building in space. The midday light gives further relief and depth to the photograph without becoming dramatic.

The effect of organization upon the illusion of depth can also be observed in a comparison of Plates 23 and 24. In Plate 23, the intrusion of dark angular shapes from the edges creates a strong



peripheral pattern which clings to the rectangle and lies on the surface. In Plate 24 the pattern of lights and darks is more closely related to the overall structural nature of the building, defining a large volume of architectural space in which the viewer can stand. The information selected for presentation in the photograph accurately defines the individual character and feeling of the church. The fluid, glowing quality of the ambient light gives an animated substance to the air within the room, softening the optical brittleness of the pattern and evoking a convincing sense of presence.

Plate 16 is a further example of the loss of space that occurs when visual information is geometrically locked to the rectangle. The plunging wall to the left, the arched ceiling, and the rear wall all become flat shapes in the surface plane. The photograph redefines three-dimensional subject matter in planar terms, rather than presenting a view of actual subject matter. In contrast, the photograph in Plate 17 retains a believable illusion of depth: the space behind the partition can be entered. Continuation of the subject matter beyond the rectangle is implied by the inclusion of loose fragments around the borders.

Plate 3 points toward a documentary ideal. It is straightforward, richly informative, visually intricate, and more convincing than much of Semchishen's earlier pictorial work. The vision is receptive, fresh, and remarkably clear. A camera position has been assumed which maximizes factual representation of the church in both volume and detail, as well as revealing the particulars of the setting and its larger geographic context. An unmistakable sense of place is achieved through inclusion of the power pole and wires, the road, and the background buildings, all of which serve to prevent isolation and idealization, presenting the church as a functioning part of the community. In addition to providing essential information, these elements lend variety, complexity, and uniqueness of form to the photograph. The organization is not created by the rectangle, but is merely subject order viewed through the rectangle. It remains free of the surface, retains its life, and extends beyond the view presented in the photograph. Neither the photograph nor the photographer obscures the subject matter from the viewer. Plates 4, 5, 12, and 13 reveal a similar willingness to let the subject be. Semchishen sees what is there to be seen and records it faithfully.

Hubert Hohn



# BYZANTINE CHURCHES OF ALBERTA

1.

Exterior

St. George's Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Manly Corner, 1974



2.

Exterior

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

Hotchkiss, 1975



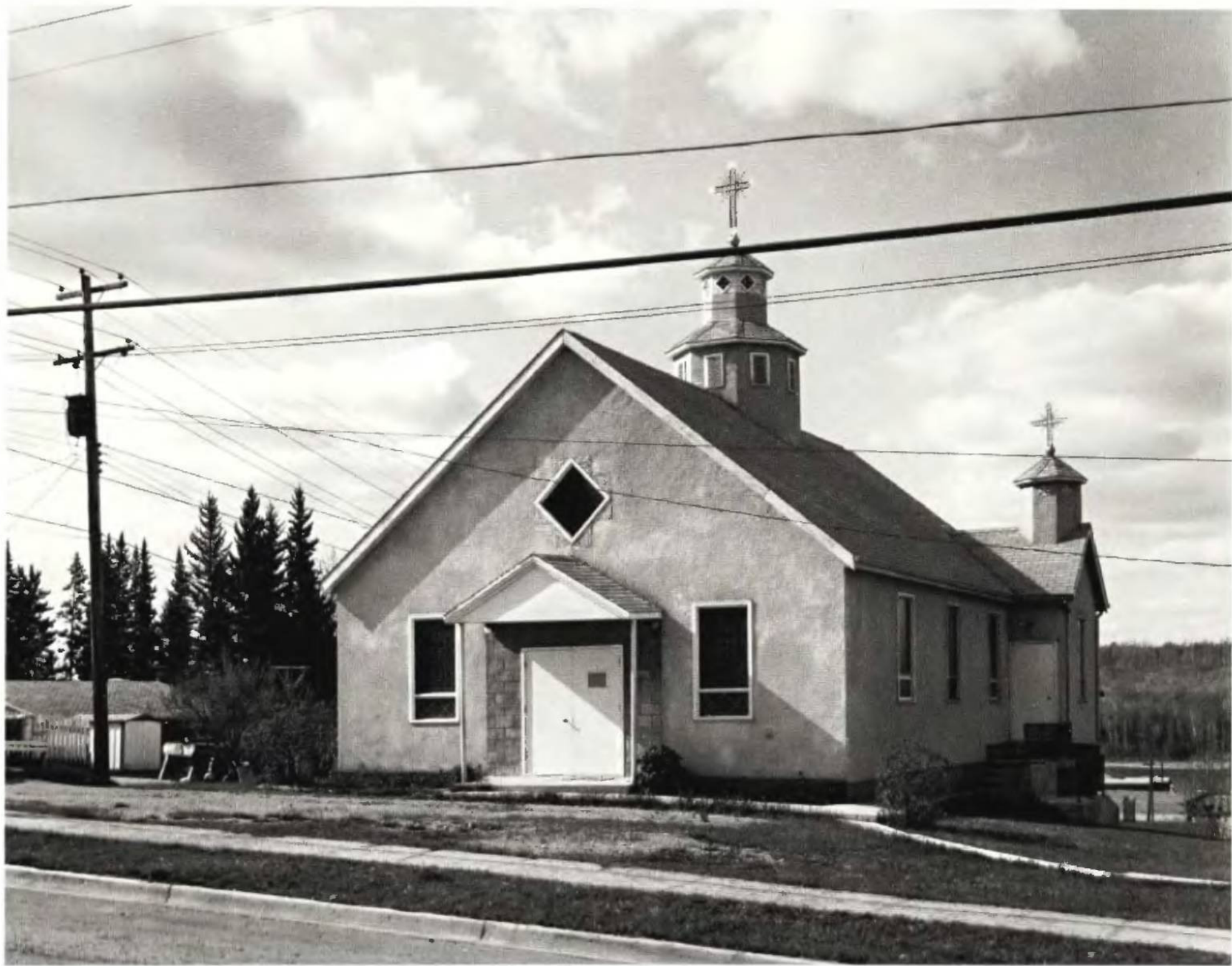
3.

Exterior

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

Athabasca, 1975





4.

Exterior

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

Mannville, 1975

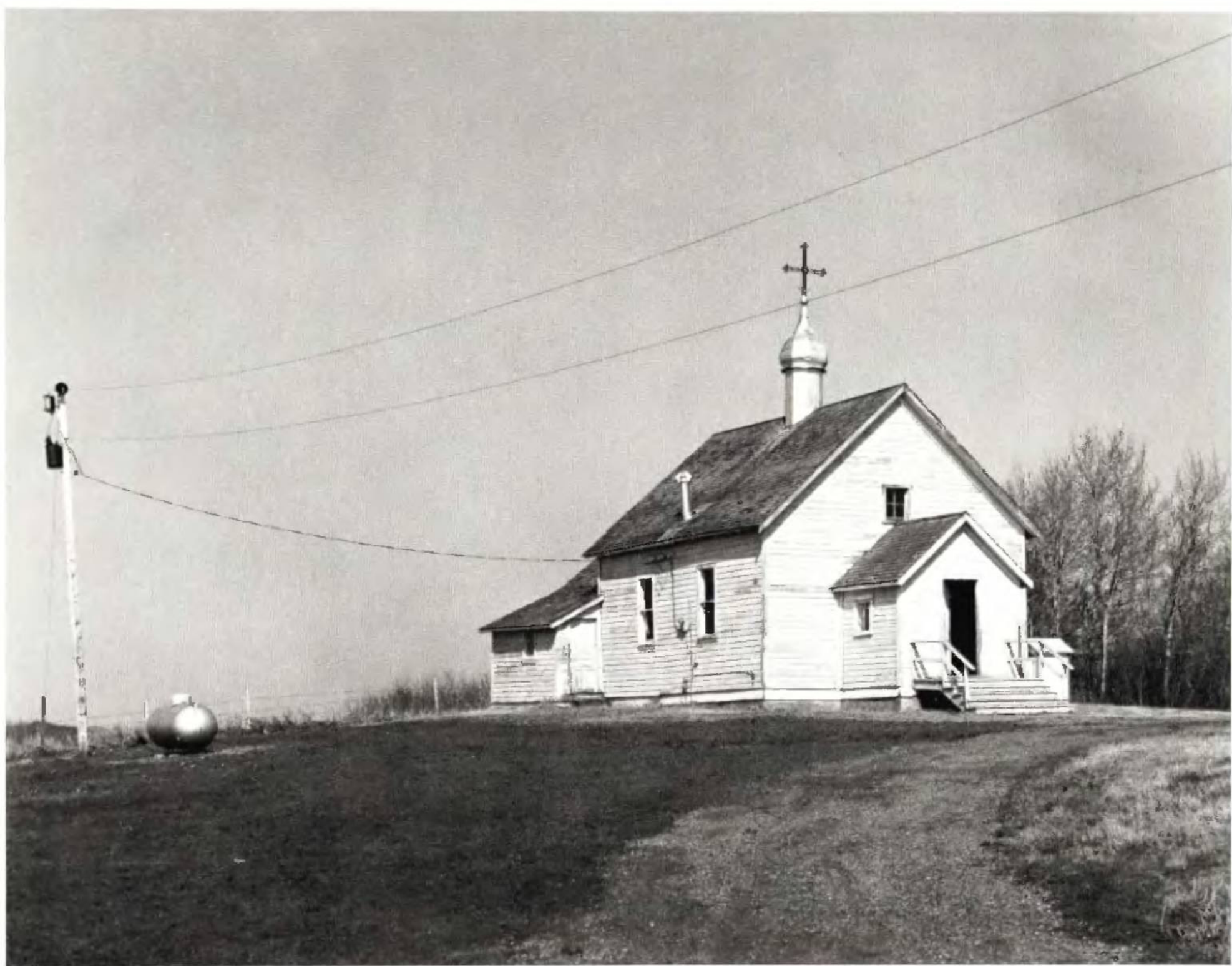


5.

Exterior

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Near Innisfree, 1975





6.

Exterior

Holy Ghost Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church  
Near Two Hills, 1975



7.

Exterior  
Russo Greek Orthodox Church  
Near Boyle, 1975





8.

Bell Tower  
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Northern Valley, 1975



9.

Exterior

Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church

Stry, 1975



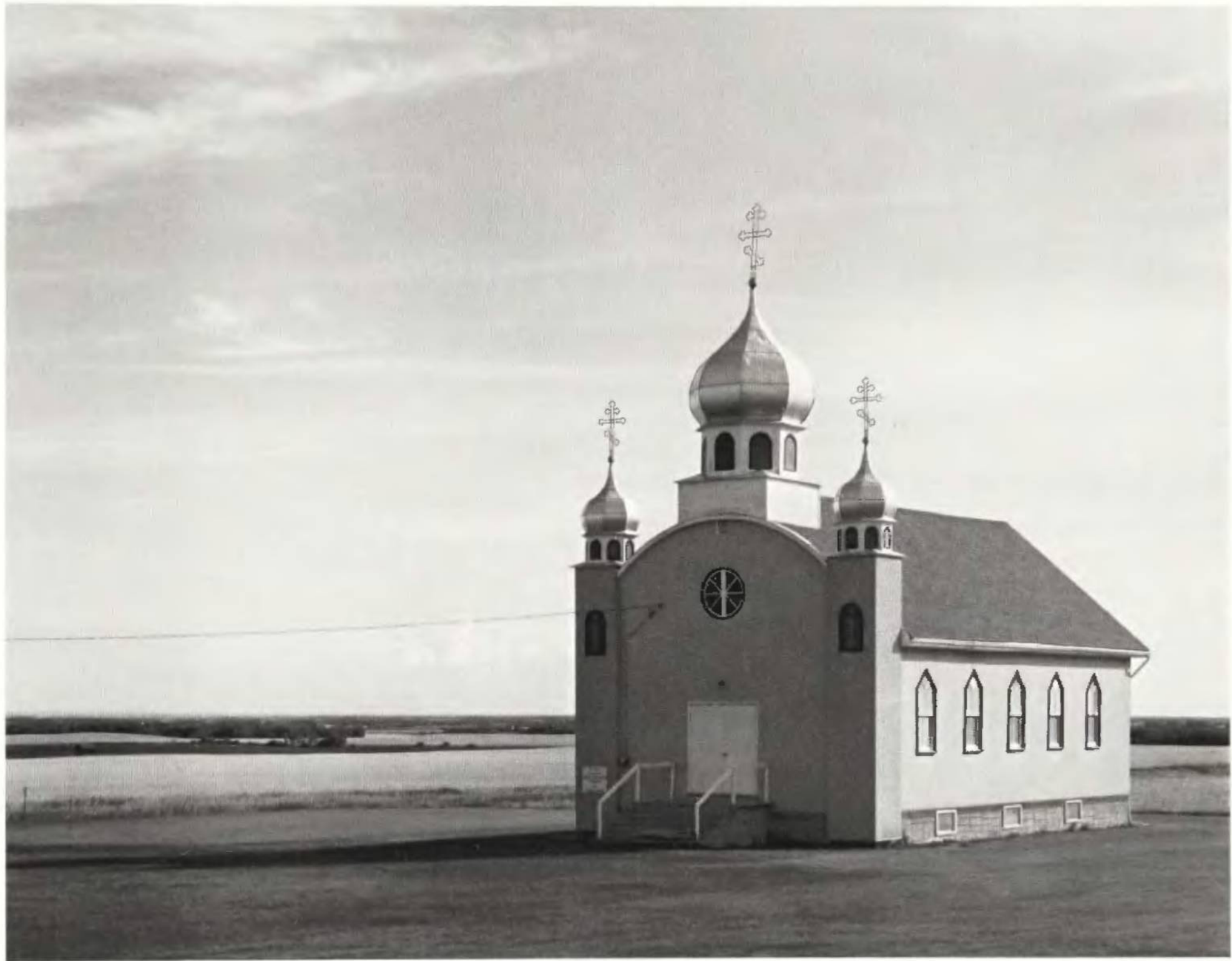
10.

Exterior

St. Elia's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church

Spirit River, 1975





11.

Bell Tower  
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Near Derwent, 1975





12.

Exterior

Holy Ghost Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

Derwent, 1974



13.

Exterior

Holy Trinity Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Plain Lake, 1975





14.

Interior

Holy Ascension Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church

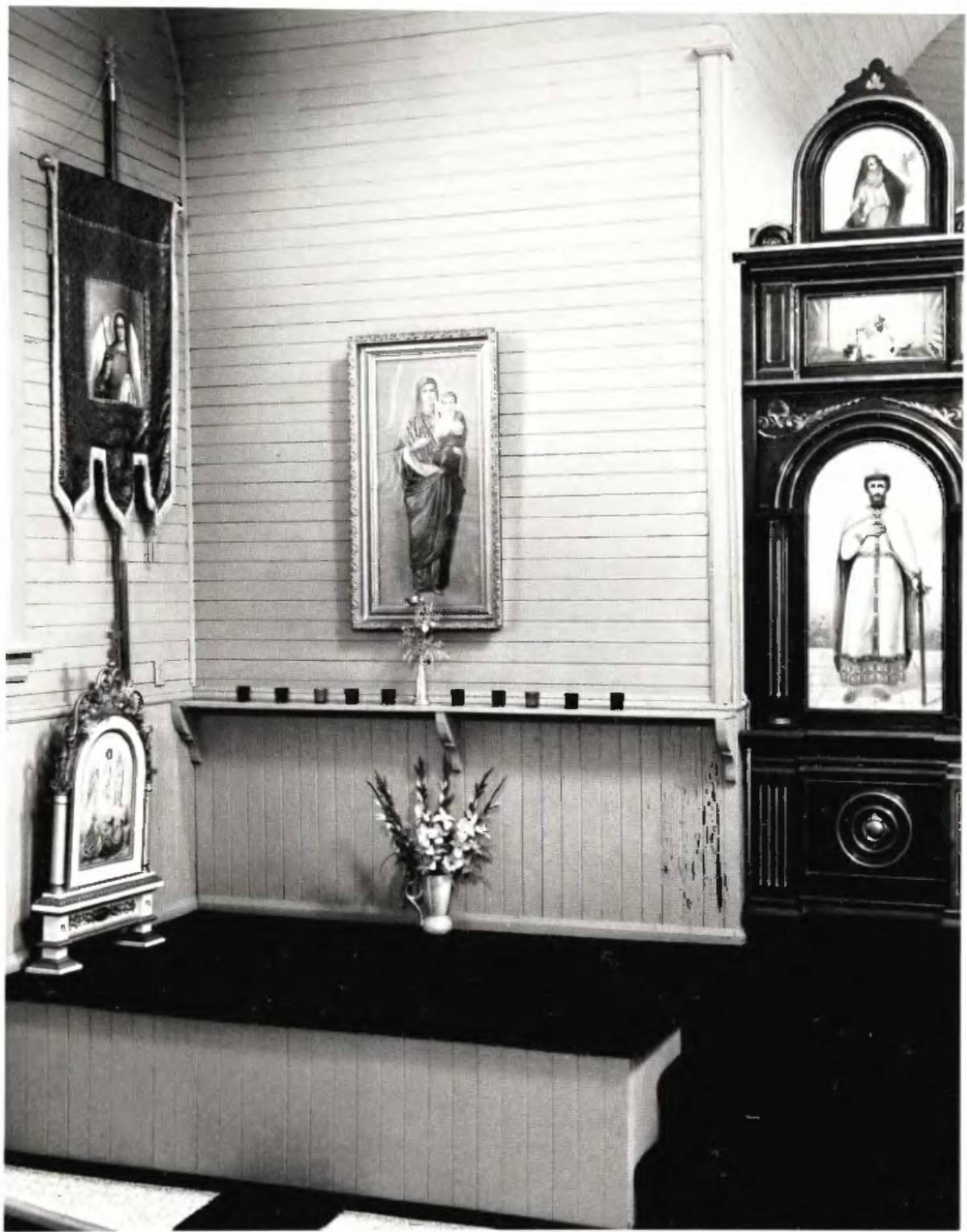
Radway, 1974



15.

Interior Detail  
Russo Greek Orthodox Church  
Near Star, 1974

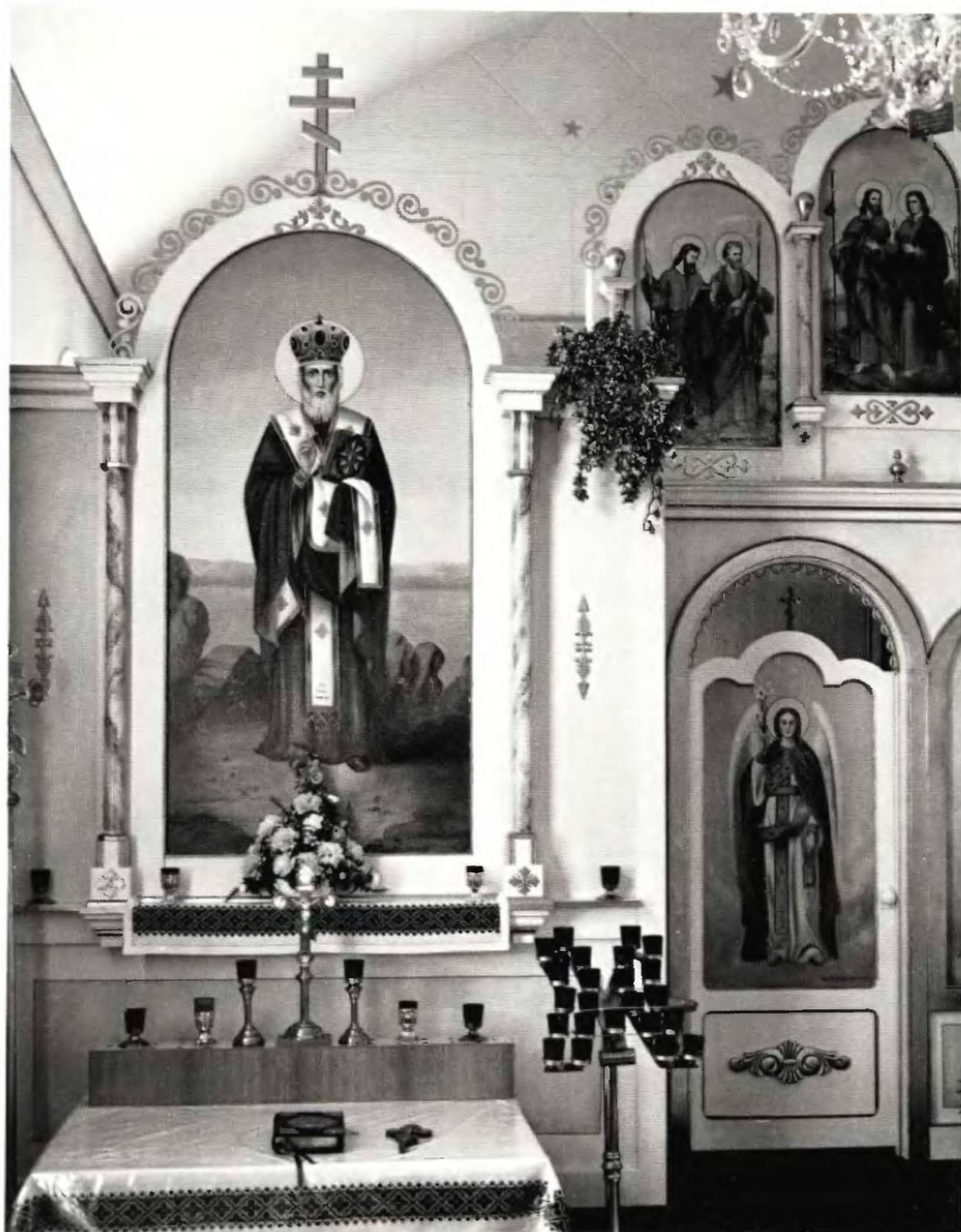




16.

Ikonostas Detail

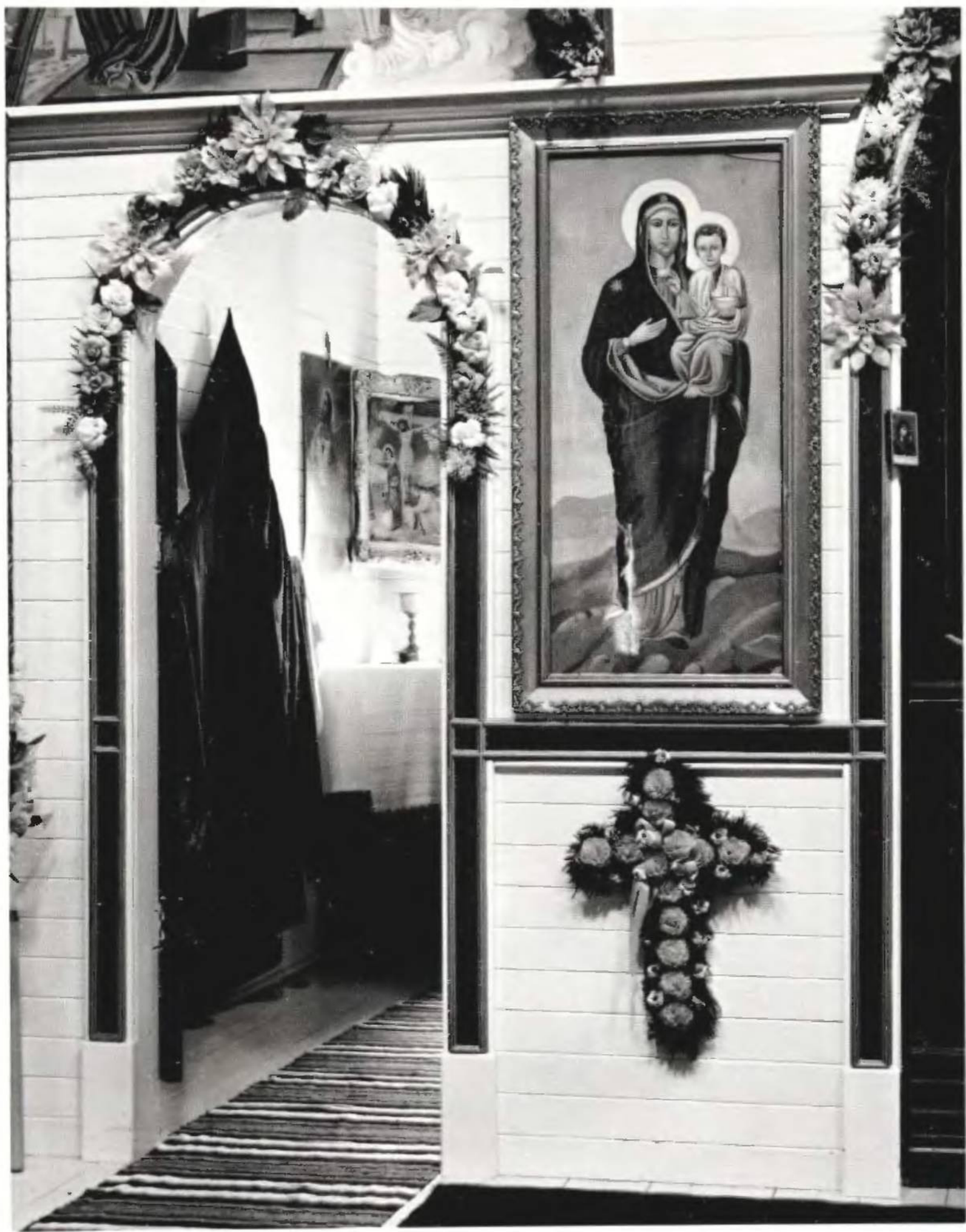
Holy Trinity Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church  
Two Hills, 1974



17.

Ikonostas Detail  
Russo Greek Orthodox Church  
Near Andrew, 1974





18.

Interior

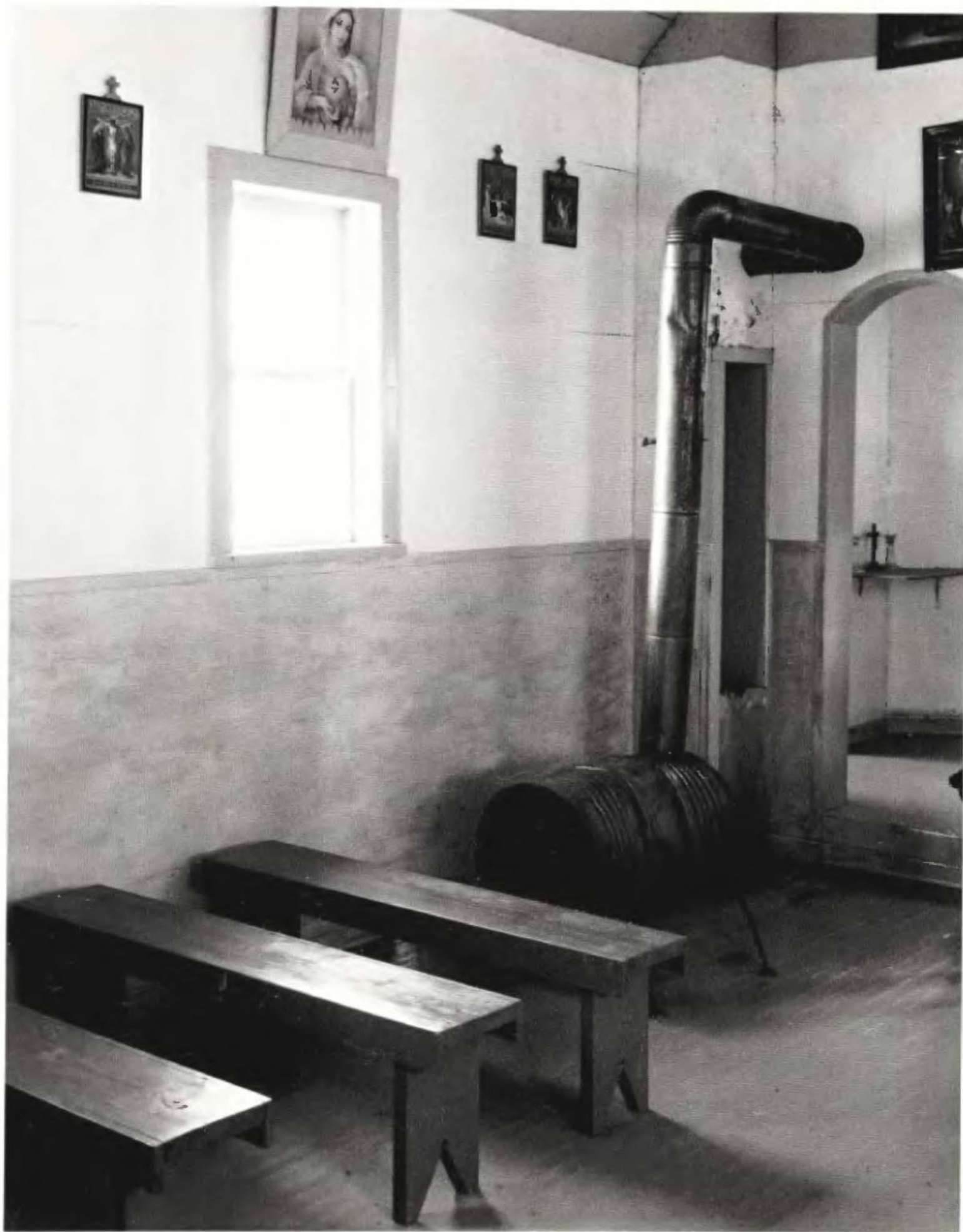
St. Peter's and St. Paul's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church  
Near Glendon, 1975





19.

Interior Detail  
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Near Maloy, 1975



20.

Interior  
Holy Trinity Greek Catholic Church  
Vegreville, 1975



21.

Choir Loft Detail  
St. Josephat's Cathedral  
Edmonton, 1974





22.

Interior Detail  
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of Transfiguration  
Near Mundare, 1974



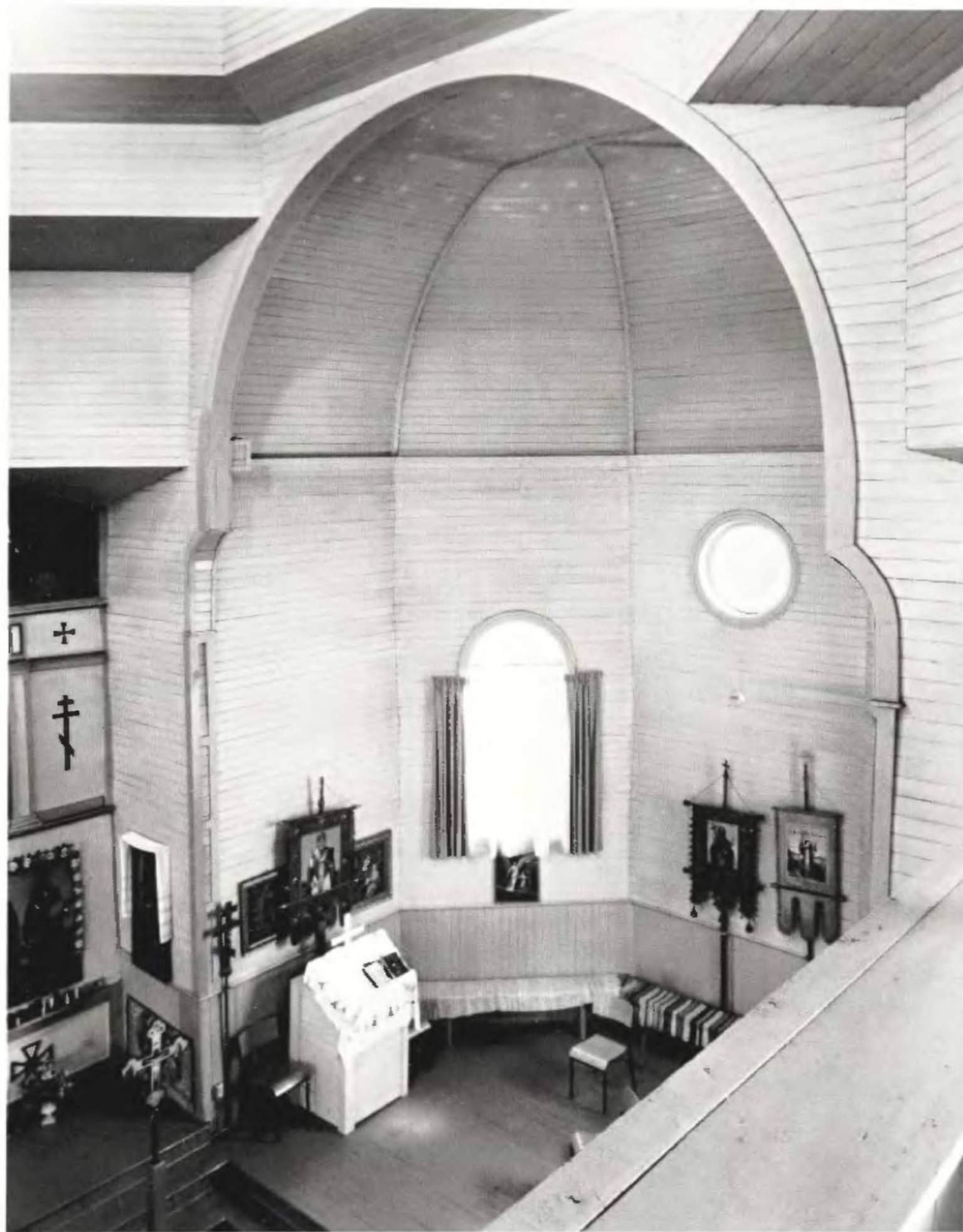


23.

Interior

St. Peter's and St. Paul's Russo Greek Orthodox Church

Near Wasel, 1973



24.

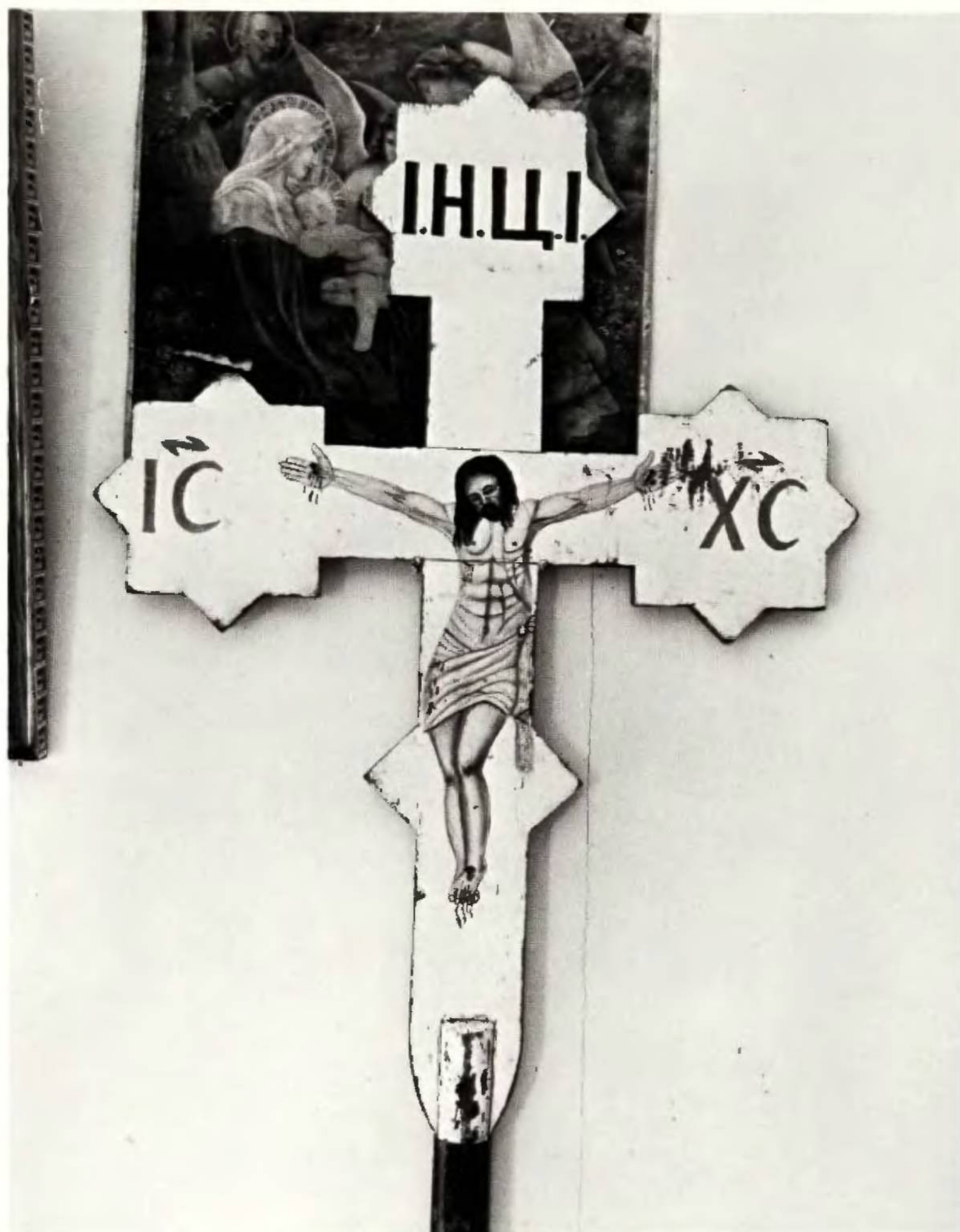
Interior  
Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church  
Near Andrew, 1974





25.

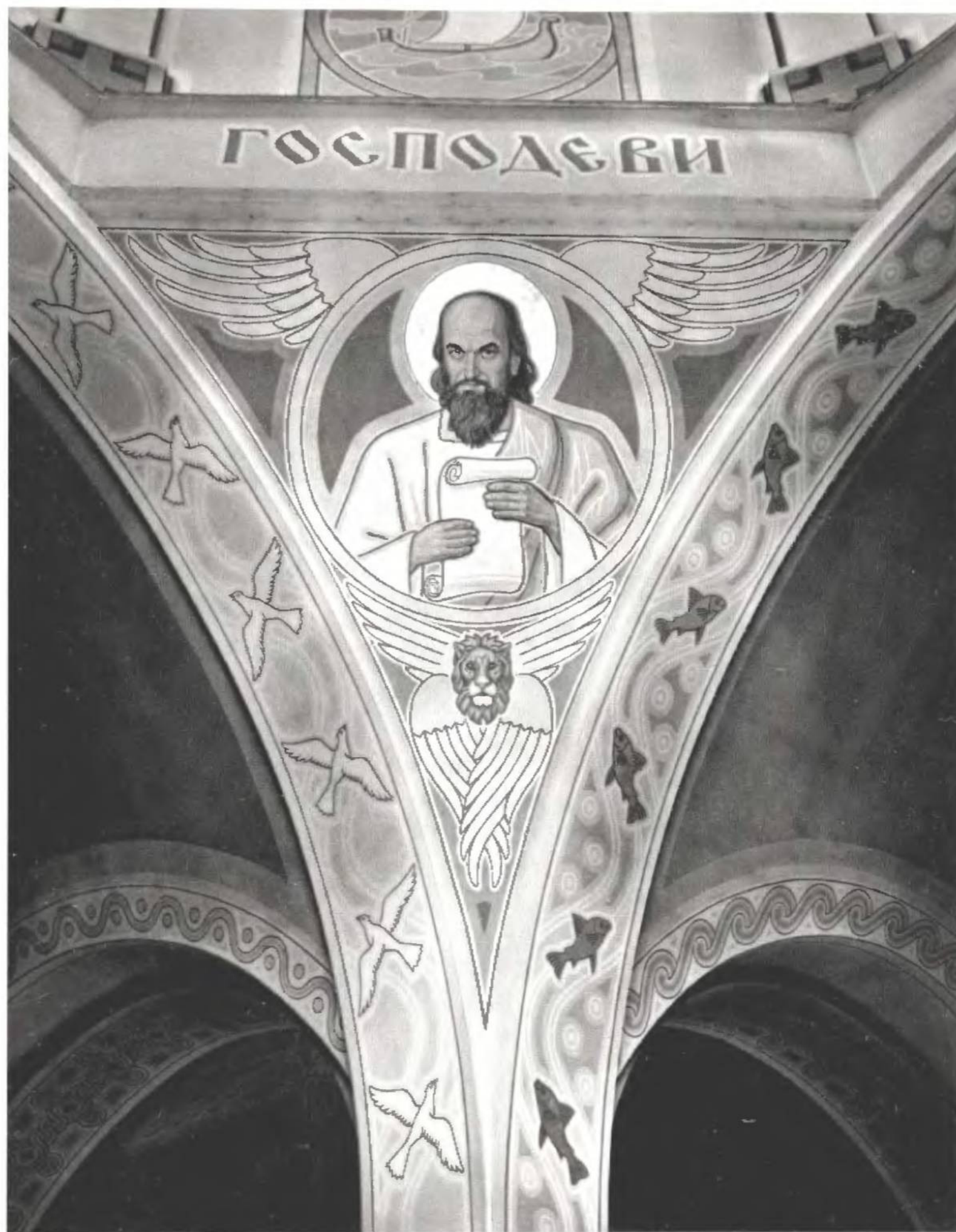
Crucifix  
Russo Greek Orthodox Church  
Near North Kotzman, 1973





26.

Pendentive Detail  
St. Josephat's Cathedral  
Edmonton, 1974

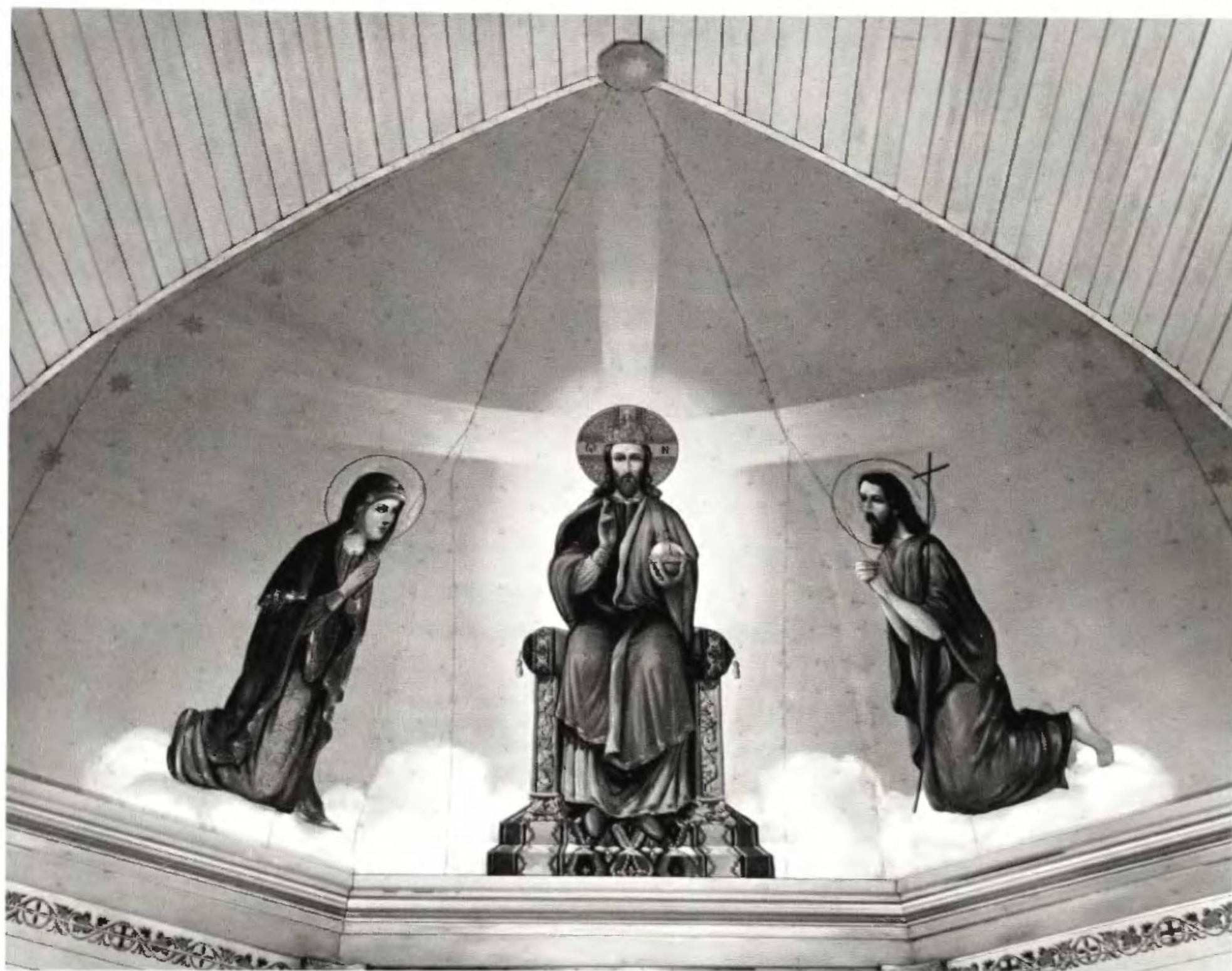


27.

Ceiling Detail

St. Vladimir's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church

Vegreville, 1973





28.

Dome

Holy Trinity Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Vegreville, 1975

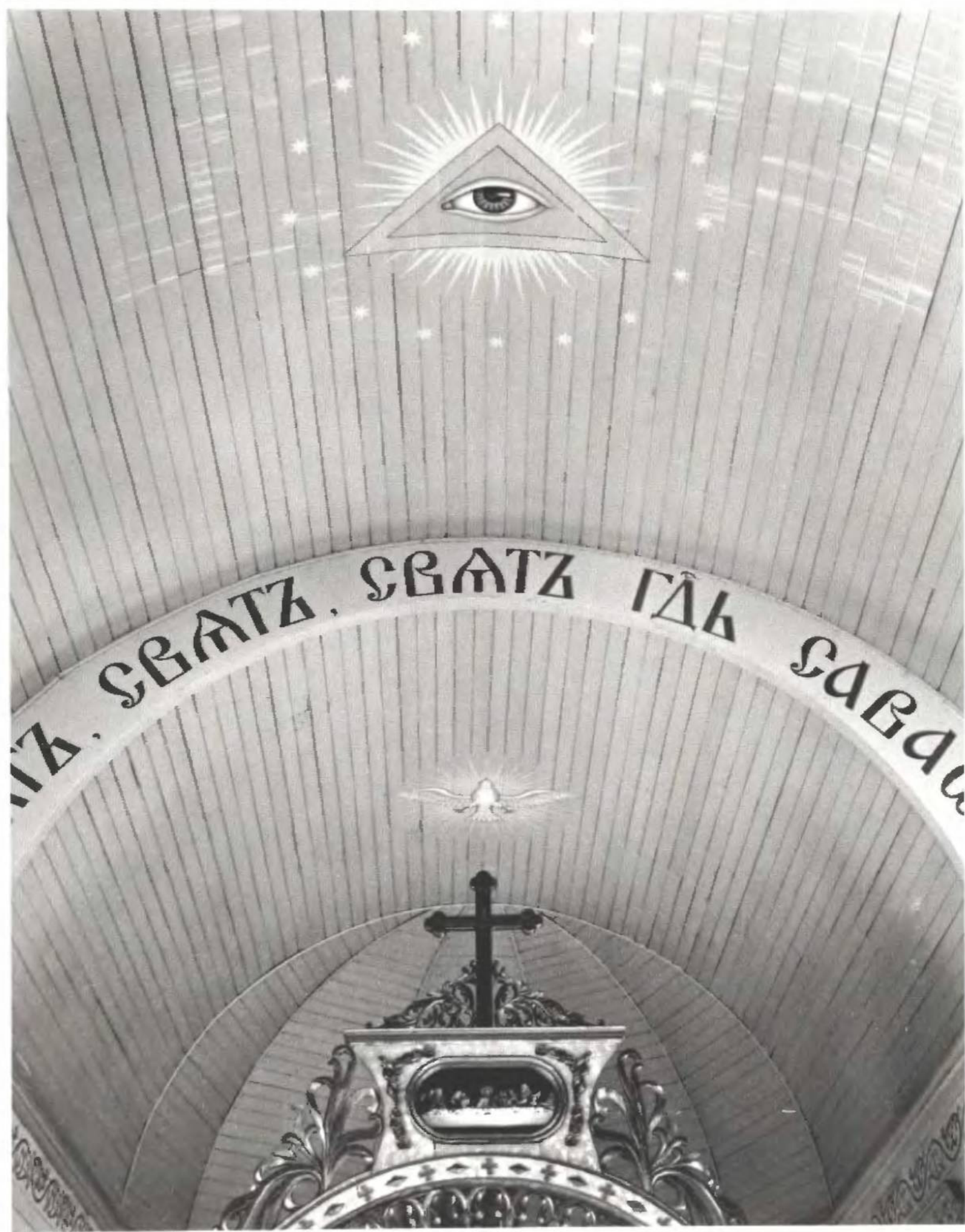




29.

Ceiling

St. Onufry's Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church  
Near Smokey Lake, 1973



30.

Dome  
Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church  
Near Andrew, 1974



The photographs in this book were selected from an exhibition series entitled, "Portrait of a Province," organized by the Edmonton Art Gallery with the generous assistance of the National Museums of Canada. The publication of the book was assisted by funding from Alberta Culture. The professional guidance of John Patrick Gillese, Director, Film and Literary Arts, has been an invaluable asset.

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These primarily small chapels were built by local craftsmen, employing local, readily available materials, and using simple, straightforward methods of construction. Frequently these structures exhibit extensive folkart characteristics and a high degree of corresponding aesthetic sensitivity.

Many of these churches are being indiscriminately destroyed to make room for new and less valuable construction, and since some of them are of considerable architectural value, there is a great need for preservation or at least proper documentation of these buildings.

Radoslav Zuk, Architect  
McGill University