

Laudare

A LITURGICAL RESOURCE FROM THE DOMINICAN INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE LITURGY

CANDLES

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Walk into any Catholic Church, and it's impossible to miss seeing candles. These tallows of wick, embedded in wax, produce light as they burn. In the church building one finds that there are candles on the altar, a special candle near the tabernacle, and votive candles in front of images or statues of Jesus, Our Lady, St. Joseph, or various other saints. Jesus tells us in the gospel, "I am the light of the world." (Jn. 8:12) Candles are a visual reminder of that light. The use of candles is one way of lighting the liturgy of God's people or their devotions to God. The following are reminders and examples of how the church enshrines light.

If one goes to the celebration of a baptism, a candle, lit from a large Paschal candle, is given to the adult being baptized or to the godparents of the child being initiated with the instruction, "Receive the light of Christ."

Attend the Easter Vigil liturgy, and there the same large Paschal candle is blessed and lit from a fire. Smaller candles are lit for those assembled from the one larger candle as all process into the church singing, "The Light of Christ! Thanks be to God!"

In addition there are other candles that get used: Advent candles, the blessing of throats with candles on the feast of St. Blaise, altar servers holding candles during the proclamation of the Gospel at Mass-- and at other liturgical rituals, the list goes on.



THE SIGNIFICANCE AND THE THEOLOGY OF CANDLES IN THE LITURGY

The word "candle" comes from the Latin verb *candeo* meaning "to shine, glow, or burn." As early as the eighth century, the word "candle" was introduced into the English language specifically in relation to liturgical practices. However, the use of a flame, used in worship, has a long history. And, while not aware of any clear historical references, there are some good assumptions that can be made.

While it is true that Judaism and other religions in the ancient world used candles in symbolic ways, candles were used principally as a light source in ancient times. The same was true for the early followers of Jesus. If Christians met before or after dark, candles would have been used in the meeting place or home just to assist individuals to see. When

Christians met in the dark Roman catacombs candles would have been used similarly, as a light source. As people arrived they most likely would have placed all candles or oil lamps in one place - it would not be safe for every person to carry and handle a fire source - tunics and robes could easily catch on fire. Ten or twenty candles sitting on a stand would give off significant light for an entire space. As history progresses light, while not losing its utilitarian purpose, takes on a more symbolic understanding.

Throughout Church history, the candle has taken on the symbolic and theological representation of Christ: the perfect candle, the perfect light...THE Light of the World. The first book of John gives a poetic description of this reality:

"What has come into being in [Christ] was life, life that was the light of men; and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it...[John] came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that everyone might believe through him. He was not the light; he was to bear witness to the light. The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; he was coming into the world." (Jn. 1:4-9)

Traditionally, liturgical candles are made of beeswax, and this is no accident or coincidence. The worker bees who gather the pure nectar of flowers don't participate in the reproduction of the species. They are solely responsible for gathering the nectar and feeding the baby bees. Reproduction is left to the queen bee and drone bees. Beeswax was used to

symbolize and to hold the flame because the flame burned while the beeswax was consumed. So it is with the Church that carries the flame of faith but it is consumed in the work of God.

Because virgin worker bees dedicate their lives to the creation of the wax and the nourishment of the hive, these bees have come to represent Our Lady, the Virgin mother who gave birth to the pure flesh of Christ, with Christ's pure flesh being symbolized by the pure beeswax. What a detailed, beautiful symbol of this reality!

Besides the general significance of candles, there are particular reasons why different candles are used for different parts of the liturgy and for devotions. Let us look at some of these.

THE EASTER OR PASCHAL CANDLE

The unique Easter candle, also known as the Paschal candle is easy to recognize because of its size: it is several feet tall and decorated with colorful designs. At the Easter Vigil it is lit with from a blessed fire, imprinted with the date of the year and a cross with five cloves. It is processed into a darkened church where it is placed and the Exultet, a hymn about Jesus' powerful resurrected light is sung.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells his listeners to have their lamps lit, and to "be like people waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes." (Lk 12:35-37)

This idea served as one of the inspirations for the Easter Candle. On Holy Saturday, the community of faith waits, with expectation for the rising of Christ from the darkness of the tomb to the light of the Resurrection.

During the Easter Vigil liturgy, the assembly lights their small candles from the Paschal candle, as a reminder to share and reflect the light of Christ in their own lives as they listen attentively to the scripture readings about how God has saved his people throughout time. In another part of the Vigil liturgy, the new Paschal candle is used to bless the water of the baptismal font where new Christians will be baptized. The priest plunges the candle into the water of the font three times, while exclaiming, "May the power of the Holy Spirit come down into the fullness of this font." The assembly's candles are re-lit as all renew their baptismal promises and make their Profession of Faith.

This same Paschal candle is also lit during baptisms throughout the year as a reminder that the Sacrament of Baptism, where we first receive the Holy Spirit, is possible because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection. Jesus brings the light of life and grace into the darkness of sin

and death.

At baptism the celebrant proclaims as he gives a light from the Paschal candle to the newly baptized:

"You have been enlightened by Christ. Walk always as children of the light and keep the flame of faith alive in your hearts. When the Lord comes, may you go out to meet Him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom."

The imagery of the candle shared, signifies the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and its passed light beautifully shows how a new soul—a new disciple of light—joins God's family in the context of the church. Continuing on this theme, the Paschal candle is often found at the end of the faithful disciple's life, near the casket during a funeral liturgy. This is symbolic of the fact that Jesus' light does not extinguish in death.

BAPTISMAL CANDLE

As noted earlier, the Baptismal candle gets its significance in the Baptismal liturgy when, after the pouring of water in the ritual, a light is taken from the Paschal candle and given to the godparents of the newly baptized with the words, "Receive the Light of Christ." It certainly is in keeping with the spirit of the liturgy of Baptism for the baptized person to retain this candle as a cherished symbol of his or her spiritual birth. Baptismal candles are often decorated with religious symbols. Churches usually provide these candles but will gladly use a candle, if brought by the parents, and, in either case, encourage them to take it home after the ceremony.

In many cultures, the Baptismal candle is kept in the home. Every year, on the anniversary of Baptism, it may be lit for a few minutes while the child, in joyful prayer, thanks God for the grace of the Sacrament and renews their baptismal vows. In some places, it is customary to use the Baptismal candle on solemn occasions in later life: on the day of first Holy Communion; on the day of Confirmation; on the Wedding day; while receiving the sacraments in serious illness; and especially at the hour of death.

In some cultures, what is left of the candle is put at the head of the coffin during the wake and kept burning until it is consumed. The faithful disciple's life lived out is consumed with the light of one's baptismal faith still shining. This is certainly true for an intentional disciple and a preacher.

ALTAR CANDLES

The use of candles on the altar appears to have begun before the 12th century. While the main use of candles was to remind all that Jesus Christ is the light of the world, but candles were also utilitarian. They helped all to see. Additionally, altar candles bring to mind the reality that many of the persecuted Christians in the first centuries celebrated Mass secretly at night or in the catacombs, with the only light being candlelight. The fortitude and perseverance of those Christians helped the Faith survive and thrive even into the 21st century.

Candles may also be used in the entrance and recessional processions of the Mass and other rituals, and they can be carried to where the Gospel is read, as a sign of triumphant joy in the presence of the words of Christ.

On a very practical note, the number of candles lit on the altar may tell who the principle celebrant is (ex: a bishop vs. a priest). In some churches Sunday Masses may have more candles than a daily Mass, and sometimes more candles are lit for special feast days.



SANCTUARY LAMP

The sanctuary lamp is a candle, placed in the church in the vicinity of the tabernacle, to remind the faithful of Christ's real Eucharistic presence in a place of adoration and to be kept to bring to the sick and homebound. This candle is usually distinguished from other candles in the church and in some churches has a red globe.



In the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Exodus describes how God commanded the Israelites to crush pure oil from olives. They were to burn the oil perpetually in a lamp before the Tabernacle of the Testimony, a place of presence, which is the tent where the Ark of the Covenant and the sacred vessels for worship were kept (Ex 27:20). If this lamp signaled to the Jewish people a sacred presence, then how much more does this lamp in Catholic Churches signal a sacred presence in the reserved Eucharist?

*The Light
of Christ!*

ADVENT CANDLES

Christians adapted ancient Germanic and Scandinavian traditions using wreaths with candles in the northern hemisphere in wintertime to create the Advent wreath tradition that we practice today. This devotion, which was first begun in the home, has made its way into the church during the weeks before Christmas culminating in the celebration of the Incarnation.



Each of the four Advent candles represents one thousand years in salvation history, from the time of Adam and Eve to the birth of Christ. As the four weeks of Advent progress, the faith community lights another candle each Sunday to represent the proximity to the glorious feast of the Light of the World's birth on Christmas.

VOTIVE AND DEVOTIONAL CANDLES

In many churches, it is traditional to light candles before the images and statues of Jesus, Our Lady, and the saints, not as an attempt at worship, but as a symbol of the light of faith with which the petitioner asks for God's help or gives thanks for favors received.

The flame could be understood symbolically as alluding to the Old Testament offering of a burnt sacrifice, made in petition, adoration, or reparation for sins.

Some churches have stands of devotional candles, but many people also choose to use devotional candles at home, and place them in a prayer corner or on a table where they pray. While prayers and petitions can be offered without candles, the physical act of lighting a candle, and perhaps giving a small monetary offering in church, is a chance for the petitioner to bring his or her entire person—body, mind, heart and soul—into the act of praying.

CANDLEMAS

On the calendar, February 2nd the Church celebrates the Presentation of Christ in the Temple and the Purification of Mary. Traditionally, this day has been referred to as Candlemas.

At Christ's Presentation in the temple by Mary and Joseph, the scriptures states that Simeon proclaimed, "Master, now let your servant go in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (LK 2:29-31)

Because of this bold statement of Christ as the light, the church chooses this feast day to have a special yearly blessing of the candles that will be used through out the year including those used to bless throats each year on the feast of St. Blaise, February 3rd.

Candles play a part in the dedication of churches and are encouraged at every sacrament except that of Penance. In all of these examples, the candle represents the enlightened and sacred character, which is brought to all these items, places, and events by Jesus Christ, who is the True Light.

WHAT DOMINICANS UNDERSTAND AND SAY ABOUT THE CANDLES

- “Creator of all things, true source of light and wisdom, origin of all being, graciously let a ray of your light penetrate the darkness of my understanding.” – St. Thomas Aquinas
- “The light of faith makes us see what we believe” –St. Thomas Aquinas
- “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” –St. Catherine of Siena
- “The devil fears hearts on fire with the love of God.” –St. Catherine of Siena
- “Truly it is in the darkness that one finds the light, so when we are in sorrow, this light is nearest of all to us.” – Meister Eckhart
- “Know that when you seek anything of your own, you will never find God, because you do not seek God purely. You are seeking something along with God, and you are acting just as if you were to make a candle out of God in order to look for something with it. Once one finds the things one is looking for, one throws the candle away. This is what you are doing.” –Meister Eckhart
- “[T]he flame of charity has to consume the wax of our sinful selves if we’re to shine with Christ’s light.” –Fr. Lawrence Lew, OP
- “The Dominican torch is a frequent symbol of that light. We might say that our vocation is rooted in a fearless search for truth. We are the flame of that truth (Veritas).” –Dominican Life USA
- “According to the Golden Legend St. Dominic’s mother while pregnant dreamed that she would give birth to a dog who would hold a torch in its mouth and would “burn the world.” It has been suggested that the dog represents a pun on Dominicanus, the word for a Dominican friar, and domini canis, “dog of the Lord.” A dog is often shown at the saint’s feet holding a torch in its mouth.” – Providence College



ECCLESIAL DOCUMENTS AND RESOURCES

<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacred-art-and-music/architecture-and-environment/composition-of-candles.cfm>

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20030317_ordinamento-messale_en.html#II. SACRED FURNISHINGS IN GENERAL

<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/triduum/roman-missal-and-the-easter-vigil.cfm>

SCRIPTURE

The Bible refers to light and lamps (torches), as the receptacle of light, innumerable times. The first act of creation is the creation of light and its separation from darkness as written in Genesis 1:14. Both day and night are ruled by light and are called "good" by the Creator. Light, in varying degrees of brightness is the gift of the Creator. Light and its antithesis, darkness, reveals and veils God's holy presence. In the Exodus story, the Israelites are led through the dessert by both the cloud and the pillar of fire which reveal the presence of the Holy.

The psalmist sings of God's word as light in several places: "Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path" (Psalm 119: 105). Send me your light and your truth; let them lead me (Psalm 43:3) and Psalm 27:1 states, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?" The prophet Isaiah, in 60:1, uses light as a metaphor for God's glory, "Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." In 60:3, the prophet continues, Nations shall come to your light..." as he states that the nations should be a light in the world. Jesus picks up this theme in numerous gospel passages. These are a few:

"You are the light of the world..." (MT 5:14)

"No one, after lighting a light puts it under a bushel basket..." (MT 5:15-16)

"I am the light of the world..."(JN 8:12)

In the prologue of St. John's gospel the word 'light' as a metaphor for Christ and his mission is mentioned 5 times. The First Letter of John uses the image of light as a symbol of living the Christian life and the New Testament concludes with the book of Revelation referring to the holy city being the place of God's light and Christ being the lamp. "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of good is its light, and its lamp is the lamb." (Rev. 21:22-25).

Some additional Scripture verses that speak about light are:

Genesis 15:17 "It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces."

Exodus 25:37 "Then you shall make its lamps seven in number; and they shall mount its lamps so as to shed light on the space in front of it."

Exodus 40:25 "He lighted the lamps before the LORD, just as the LORD had commanded Moses"

Judges 7:16 "He divided the 300 men into three companies, and he put trumpets and empty pitchers into the hands of all of them, with torches inside the pitchers."

1 Samuel 3:3 "...and the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was,"

1 Kings 7:49 "...and the lampstands, five on the right side and five on the left, in front of the inner sanctuary, of pure gold; and the flowers and the lamps and the tongs, of gold;"

Exodus 37:23 "He made its seven lamps with its snuffers and its trays of pure gold."

1 Chronicles 28:15 "...and the weight of gold for the golden lampstands and their golden lamps, with the weight of each lampstand and its lamps; and the weight of silver for the silver lampstands, with the weight of each lampstand and its lamps according to the use of each lampstand;"

Matthew 25:1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom."

2 Samuel 22:29 "For you are my lamp, O LORD; And the LORD illumines my darkness."

Psalm 119:105 "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

Proverbs 6:23 "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life"

Zephaniah 1:12 "It will come about at that time That I will search Jerusalem with lamps, And I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit, who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good or evil!'"

Proverbs 20:27 "The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, Searching all the innermost parts of his being."

Job 29:3 "When His lamp shone over my head, And by His light I walked through darkness;"

Proverbs 31:18 "She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night."

Job 18:6 "The light in his tent is darkened, and his lamp goes out above him."

Revelation 1:20 "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

Revelation 1:14 "His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire."

Job 21:17 "How often is the lamp of the wicked put out, or does their calamity fall on them? Does God apportion destruction in His anger?"

Psalm 18:28 "For you light my lamp; The LORD my God illumines my darkness."

Acts 20:8 "There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together."

REFLECTION

- A candle cannot light itself. It needs to receive light from another. How are you connected to the One who is “the light come into the world” and how do you share that light with others?
- A candle’s flame burns upward while it sheds its light outward. How might this reality feed and enhance your preaching and ministry?
- At the heart of the candle’s light there is a death happening, as the wick burns upward and the wax around it melts and evaporates. How does this symbol of Paschal mystery connect to our own spiritual lives and to the lives of those that we serve?

ACTION

Pope Francis celebrated a Mass for the Dominican family, at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, for the conclusion of the Order’s Jubilee Year celebrating the 800th anniversary of our founding. In quoting Jesus in MT 5:13-16 at that liturgy the Holy Father called upon the Order of Preachers to be salt and light in a throw away culture. Today in our preaching, using words and deeds, let us commit to bringing the light of God’s mercy to others in joy. Light spreads like a flame from one to another. Joy, true joy, is infectious... and as St. Dominic and all our holy brothers and sisters in the family before have known; light and joy impels us forward. Today, let us be light and joy as we bear witness to the One who is our light.

PRAYER

O God, source and origin of all light,
 who on this day showed to the just man Simeon
 the Light for revelation to the Gentiles,
 we humbly ask that,
 in answer to your people’s prayers,
 you may be pleased to sanctify with your blessing these candles,
 which we are eager to carry in praise of your name,
 so that, treading the path of virtue,
 we may reach that light which never fails.
 Through Christ our Lord.
 Amen.

The Blessing of Candles from the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord



CONCLUSION

“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness”. What a wonderful saying! It doesn’t need much explanation. Spread the light, not the dark.

The use of candles in worship and in prayer has a long history. Throughout the world, lighting candles is a sacred ritual. People light candles for many purposes: to illuminate darkness, to dedicate

prayers, to solidify intentions, to offer blessings, to evoke the Spirit, and to nourish grateful living. Both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have always made use of candles in their liturgies, as have some other traditions. Candles assist those who are praying, in a symbolic way, to move out of darkness and to spread the light of the One who is Light from Light.

What is darkness, but the absence of light. Darkness is removed by lighting a light. Darkness has no power over light . . . so long as it shines. May this reflection on the liturgical use of candles assist all who use them to be consumed in the light and warmth of God.

NOTES

