

# Candles

The use of lights in worship is older than the Church. Pagans commonly used oil lamps or candles in their services and processions. A seven-branched candlestick (candelabrum) was among the furnishings within the tabernacle of Moses and the Jewish Temple. In the Christian Church candles were first used to dispel darkness when the faithful met together for worship before dawn or in the gloom of the catacombs. Their beautiful and practical symbolic meaning was soon recognized, so that the custom of blessing candles goes far back, probably to the fourth century.

Light is pure, penetrates the darkness, fosters life, moves with incredible speed, and illuminates all things around it. Accordingly, it serves as a fitting emblem of God, the "All Pure," the "Giver of Life" and enlightenment, and of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the "Light of the World."

Candles signify the sacrificial. When burned and entirely consumed, they return to God's creation. Once blessed a candle becomes a "sacramental," which is any object set apart by the Church to engender good thoughts and to increase devotion of the faithful. While a sacramental possesses some of the attributes of a sacrament, nevertheless it is very different, because while a sacrament conveys grace, a sacramental is merely suggestive.

Wax is spotless, and in its candle form typifies Christ's spotless Body. The wick enclosed is a metaphor of His Soul, the flame a figure of the divine nature united to the human in one divine Person.

Candlemas Day, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is associated with candles, for on that day Mary presented her infant son, our Lord, in the Temple as an offering to God, and there the prophet Simeon foretold that He would be "a light to enlighten the gentiles." (Luke 2:28-32) With the passage of time, candles were blessed before this Mass and carried in procession, thus the term Candlemas or Mass of the candles. As the day occurs in the Epiphany or missionary season, the ceremony reminds us of our duty as bearers of the "Light of Christ" to all mankind.

The number of candles used in a particular liturgical service relates to the ecclesiastical use of numbers as symbols (Leachman, The Church's Object Lessons). Christian tradition, a balanced liturgical sense, good taste and the occasion determine their number and use. The minimum number of two candles on an altar emphasizes the continuity of the long life of the Church. These always burn during the Eucharist and are commonly referred to as Eucharistic lights or Mass candles. The author of Revelation saw our Lord "in the midst of the candlesticks and lampstands" (Revelation 1:13), so the use of three candles on either side of the altar cross, for a total of six with Christ in their midst is referred to as the "office lights." These burn when the Church's offices (matins or morning prayer, vespers, evening prayer or evensong, compline, etc.) are offered and during sung, solemn, and high Eucharists in addition to the Mass candles. When a bishop offers the Eucharist, at least one, but usually two extra candles are lighted. These bishop's candles are set apart from the Mass and office lights in some way to make them distinctive. Before shrines votive candles are used in connection with prayer, thanksgiving, alms-giving and vocation. (See Wikipedia, Votive Candles)

## Lighting and Extinguishing Candles

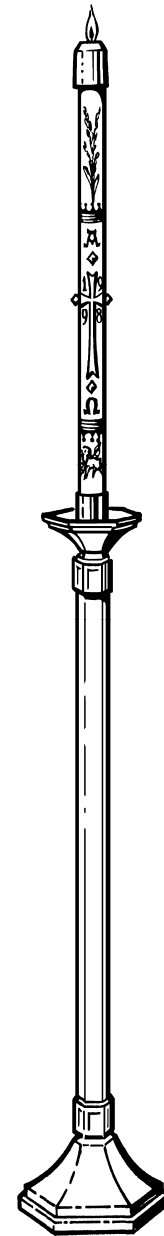
Candles nearest the altar cross are lit first, beginning on the epistle side. When there are many candles on the altar, two acolytes should conjointly perform the lighting function, one on either side of the cross, lighting the corresponding candles simultaneously in the above order. If there is only one acolyte that person should light all the candles on the epistle side before crossing over to light those on the gospel side. In extinguishing candles the reverse order is observed, namely beginning on the gospel side those furthest from the cross are put out first. They should never be put out before "Thanks be to God" has been said. The congregation should not be unduly detained after a service awaiting the extinguishing of candles. It is proper in lighting and extinguishing altar candles for the server to be vested in cassock and cotta (or surplice).

Two acolytes should carry lighters in opposite hands to appear visually symmetrical when approaching and leaving the altar. If it is the parish custom (and not a duty of the altar guild), an acolyte should remove the dust cloth from the altar before the candles have been lighted and replace the cover on the altar after the candles have been

extinguished.

## Special Use Candles

### Pascal Candle.



The Pascal Candle, blessed on Easter Even, represents the "Pillar of Cloud and of Fire" which went before the Hebrews in their wanderings, (See Exodus 13:21-22 and also Nehemiah 9:19), and is symbolic of the Holy Ghost. The "virgin wax" represents to us the most-pure flesh of Christ which he received of the Virgin Mary, for the wax is the work of the bee, which from ancient times has been a symbol of virginity. The wick represents Christ's human Soul, and the flame His divine Person united with His Soul. Five blessed grains of incense in red wax are placed into holes representing by their number the Five Wounds of Christ, and by their substance the spices with which Our Lord's Body was embalmed.

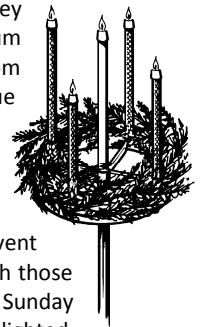
After having been blessed, the Pascal Candle is carried in front of the procession to the font to symbolize the leading of the catechumens to the waters of salvation in Holy Baptism, just as the Pillar of Fire led the Israelites to the Red Sea. It is then dipped into the water in the font to typify the descent of the Holy Ghost at Holy Baptism.

The Pascal Candle is usually lighted from the New Fire struck from off of a flint on the church porch, after which all the lights in the church are then lit, teaching that Christ dispels the darkness of this sinful world. In some parishes a gas light in the sanctuary or sacristy is lit from the Pascal Candle which burns at low intensity throughout the year (the Resurrection Light), from which servers light their torches or lighters saying "[t]he Light of Christ, Amen."

The Pascal Candle burns on the gospel side of the altar at all liturgical services during the Great Forty Days from Easter until Ascension Day, and after the

reading of the Holy Gospel on Ascension Day it is extinguished, symbolizing the Ascension of our Lord. At Baptisms a small candle is given to the sponsors of the newly baptized and this candle is lighted from the Pascal Candle which is brought out for this purpose. During Eastertide in the custom of some parishes the Pascal Candle replaces the processional cross carried by the center acolyte.

Advent Candles. Advent Candles appear at the cardinal compass points of the Advent Wreath, and are sequentially lighted during the four Sundays next preceding Christmas. They are colored either purple or sarum blue depending upon the custom of individual parishes. If blue candles are used the candle representing the 3d Sunday in Advent is colored rose pink in recognition of Gaudete Sunday.



Each Sunday an additional advent candle is lighted in company with those of earlier weeks until on the last Sunday before Christmas all four are lighted. Advent candles are extinguished after office and Mass candles at conclusion of the service.

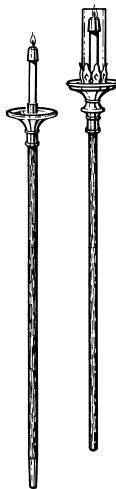
Funeral Candles. At funeral offices sometimes two, four, or six candlesticks stand around the bier or catafalque of the deceased. This custom is not much used currently, except in the case of funerals for high-ranking statesmen and bishops of the Church. It occurs during the lying-in-state ceremony that precedes the actual requiem liturgy, and brown or unbleached wax candles are normally used. These candles express our joy that the deceased has been released from this world of sin and woe, and will one day rise to the light of life eternal, when death shall be swallowed up in victory. They symbolize the mystery of the Resurrection referred to in the Burial Office Lesson. They further symbolize immortality and denote that the soul of the departed, although gone from its earthly tabernacle, is still alive.

Tenebrae Candles. Matins (morning prayer) and lauds of the three last days of Holy Week are said with the usual six office lights on the altar, and fifteen others arranged on the Epistle Side. One stands above the rest in the center and represents

our Lord, while the other fourteen arranged on a triangular hearse or pair of seven-branched candelabra represent the disciples. (The number 14 derives from the inclusion of Judas Iscariot with the original Twelve Apostles and the addition of Mathias, who replaced him and Paul.) One on each side is put out alternately during certain portions of the service, until at last a single candle only remains burning and all the other lights are out and the building is in darkness. This service is called *Tenebrae*, from the Latin plural noun meaning darkness or shadows, and the extinguishing of the candles represents our Lord having been deserted by His disciples one-by-one.

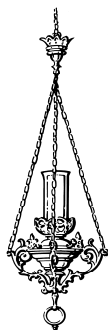
### Torches

Torches consisting of a pair of wooden poles surmounted by a single candle each are carried by acolytes during the opening and closing processions when the choir and clergy are processing in and out of the church. They are also part of the procession when the Gospel is carried partially down the main aisle. Originally torches served the purpose of providing illumination for the deacon whose function was to read the selected Gospel passage for the service. With the advent of electric lighting in churches the ceremonial function of the torches and the torch-bearing acolytes continues. During the service torches remain lighted and rest in holders symmetrically located to the left and right sides of the altar



### Sanctuary Lamps

The Sanctuary Lamp, or Altar Lamp is a light that shines before the altar on a permanent basis. It may be either an oil lamp or a candle. The custom descends to us from Jewish tradition (See Exodus 27:20-21). In a similar manner an Aumbry Lamp is kept burning in chapels before the Reserved Sacrament. *N.B.*, frequently Aumbry Lamps are powered by electricity.



## Candle Parts and Associated Hardware

The Follower is a term used to describe a brass fitting placed around the candle just at the top. Its purpose is to cause the wax to be evenly consumed by the candle flame and it also eliminates the problem of excess wax dripping down the shaft of the candle. At the candle's base a glass disk with a hole in its center called a Bobash, serves the purpose of preventing any wax that might escape from the follower from falling below the candle where it could foul the brass or silver candlestick or worse, drip onto linen altar cloths.

Candles in church are both lighted and put out by an appliance known as a Lighter. It is made of polished brass about four feet in length with a wooden handle or grip adding a further 10 inches or so to its overall length for the acolyte to hold attached to a dual-sided brass fixture that on one side contains a bell-shaped snuffer while on the other there is a wax taper encased in a brass tube that once lighted is then used in the lighting of all the candles at a particular service. The taper is attached to a metal band on the lighter side of the device that slides into the brass tube of the lighter and can be pushed out by means of a sliding lever as necessary to maintain sufficient length for the taper to hold a steady flame. To douse the taper it is withdrawn entirely into the brass tube of the lighter.

### Liquid Candles

Earlier reference has been made to the purity and symbolism of beeswax, and for many centuries all candles both sacred and ordinary contained 100% beeswax, as it was the only known substance suitable for candle making. With the advent of refined petroleum products in the nineteenth century, however, paraffin began to replace beeswax for use in non liturgical settings, but the Church kept to the old standard for many years. Ancient custom notwithstanding, in recent years there has been a gradual acceptance of paraffin, initially in a 51% beeswax 49% paraffin mixture, and then 100% paraffin. It has been determined that paraffin candles are less prone to drip than beeswax, and they are a fraction of the cost.

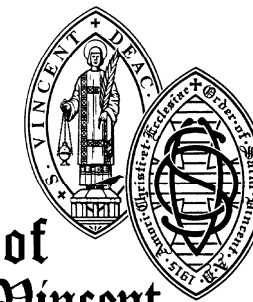
In the closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a further development in liturgical candles was made by producing a synthetic plastic candle hollowed out to contain a reservoir for liquid paraffin and a woven fibreglas wick. The liquid

paraffin is filtered multiple times for extreme clarity and purity with the end to make it odorless, clean burning, and longer lasting than comparable wax candles, while not reducing its length as the liquid inside is consumed. In recent years liquid candles have steadily increased in popularity providing ease of lighting, an appearance that replicates traditional candles newly installed on the altar, and economy. After the initial investment of hardware the candles last for years, and the wicks do not destroy themselves in the burning process. Lighting liquid candles is easy as the acolyte never has to worry about wicks having broken off or being pushed down in the candle.

For more information concerning candles and their use refer to "Serving Basics" published by the Order of St. Vincent.



# All about CANDLES



The International  
**Order of  
St. Vincent**

St. Vincent's Tract  
No. 2

© Int. Order of St. Vincent 2011.  
All rights reserved. This tract may not be reproduced in whole or in part without the written permission of the OSV.