

Ask Fr James

Why do we light Sacred Candles at Mass?

In the Catholic tradition, plain white candles are lighted for the celebration of the Holy Mass and during other liturgical prayer celebrations and processions to remind us of Divine presence. The white color candles connote purity, cleanliness, and holiness. Candles represent light, the light of God, the light of Christ. In the beginning God said "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), that God is light (1 John 1:5) and provides light (Isa. 42:16) and consequently Jesus is "the light of the world" (John 8:12).

In the Old Testament times an oil lamp is lighted using the Menorah; the seven-branch candelabra used in Temple worship to signify divine presence in the Tabernacle inside the Holy of Holies. This practice continued in the New Testament, where a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lamp stand and the table and the "bread of the Presence" (shew bread); it is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies" (Hebrews 9:2-3).

In the same way, today, candles are lit before the Tabernacle and around the altar to signify the Lord's presence in the Blessed Sacrament and to call for reverence on the part of the faithful. They remain lit upon the worship altars throughout the service. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) states; "The candles, which are required at every liturgical service out of reverence and on account of the festiveness of the celebration, are to be appropriately placed either on or around the altar" #307.

Jesus tells us to have our lamps lit (Luke 12:35-37) so that we ourselves might radiate that light outward. Every year on Holy Saturday; at the Easter vigil service, the priest lights the Easter (paschal) candle from the Holy Fire and the priest enters the darkened church with the single Easter candle and thence invites all the faithful to light their candles from this candle held up by the priest as the congregation chants the Easter salutation - "Christ our light is Risen!"

This yearly manifestation of light mean that we are praying for the Divine Light to illuminate us. It is the same idea that we ritually transmit when at the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults or baptism of children (infants), a lighted candle from the paschal candle is presented to the neophyte establishing sacramentality; a deep connection between them and their immersion into the dying and rising of Jesus.

Above all, candles are symbols for divine light and holiness, and lighting them invokes the presence of the divine; and as representations of spiritual power, they call forth divine agents to attend to the worshiping community. Angels are attracted to candle light, and since they act as intermediaries between God and the world, lighted candles in Church is a channel of communication between God in heaven and human beings on earth. God is light and angels are drawn to lighted candles during worship and prayers, allowing the surroundings to be spiritually illuminated. Lighting a candle and Praying with them calls an angel/ "calls the angels," to come and assist with that communication and carry our prayers to God.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins.