

Our Catholic Traditions: Candles

When we think of the use of candles, we often think of power outages, setting a mood or adding a fragrance to the air, camping, or birthday cakes. We also think of our Catholic faith. Did you ever stop think that today we have many sources of energy to provide illumination... so why do we still use candles in our churches? They serve more than a practical function.

When we read the Old Testament, we discover that the use of lamps and lights was part of the Temple worship of the Jewish people. Like many Jewish religious customs, elements of worship were pulled into Christian worship in the Church's early centuries, and candles are no exception.

Our sacramental life is rich with symbolism and ways we experience God. Candles are one of many symbols with layers of meaning. The flame points us to Jesus. During the procession with the Easter candle during the Easter Vigil, the priest sings, "Christ our light!" We respond, "Thanks be to God." Jesus is often referred to as the Light of the World. The smoke and heat rising from the candle symbolize our prayers, our heartfelt response to God's invitation, rising to God.

There are different types of candles used for different celebrations.

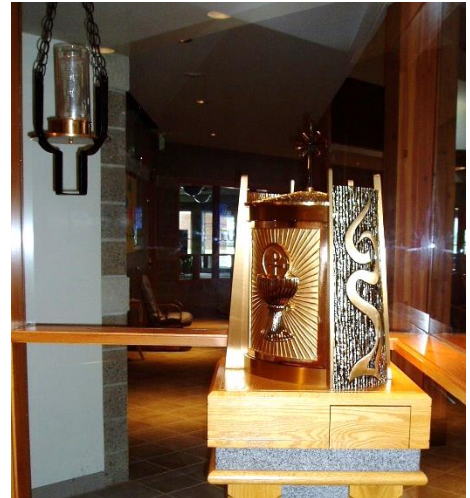
Candles for Mass

During Mass, there are several candles lit on the altar. They remind us of Jesus' presence in Word and Sacrament.



Sanctuary Lamp

When Mass is celebrated, the Eucharist is consecrated, and some of the consecrated hosts are kept in reserve. They are safely kept in the tabernacle, to be used to take Communion to the sick and to allow people to pray in the presence of the Eucharist. Near the tabernacle is a lighted candle in a glass container, called the sanctuary lamp. As long as the Eucharist is in the tabernacle, the candle remains burning.



Easter Candle

Each year at the Easter Vigil, the Easter fire is blessed and a new Easter candle is blessed and lit. The Easter candle burns at all Masses during the Easter season. It is also burned for the celebration of baptism and for funerals.





Baptismal Candle

When a person is baptized, a candle is lit from the Easter candle and given to the parents and godparents, or sponsor, with the instruction to keep the light of faith burning the newly baptized. The candle is given to the family and may be burned on the anniversary of baptism, at Confirmation, and at other special celebrations of faith for the baptized person.

Votive candles

In many churches, you will find one or more banks of candles. They can be large or small (or both), and they are often located near a statue or other image of Jesus or a saint. Usually some are lit, but not all. They are available for people to light as they pray for a person or special intention. The smoke and heat rising from the candle symbolize the prayer continuing to rise to God even after the person who lit the candle in prayer has left. Usually a small offering is given to cover the cost of the candles.



Advent wreath candles

The Advent wreath has four candles, one for each week of the season. On each Sunday of Advent, one more candle is lit to mark the time until Christmas.

