

ENCOURAGEMENT

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Candlelight: from darkness into light

The beauty of candlelight is timeless. The flicker of a candle draws us to measure its flame, see the shadow it casts, observe the dance that it makes. Candles have been a source of light for generations and it would be hard not to see the references to it in the Old Testament as well as the continued use of candles in our churches. They are used in many ceremonial acts as well as our homes. Not only are they the source of light but they are also a source of heat and many candles together can heat up any room. Today however the symbolism and the use of candles while filling our shops with delight almost throughout the year has been lost to their use as merely decorative and perfuming sources. Special shops abound as we think of romantic evenings or table decorations which ‘of course’ have to match the tableware.



Apart from their use as givers of light they have been used to indicate something very important about light itself and act as a potent symbol of Jesus as the Light of the World. Throughout Advent, Christmas into Christmastide we are constantly reminded of the centrality of Jesus as the source of all light. The white pure candle as the centre of the Advent wreath tell us that He has come and that He is with us, among his people. He is the light that dispels the darkness of our world the darkness that he came to overcome. This symbol continues in many forms throughout the liturgy and at different times of the year. Until fairly recently, Christmastide ended with the feast of Candlemass, on the second of February, when candles were blessed, those to be used in the churches and feast days. It ended the many Epiphanies, the many revealings of Jesus to the Jews, the Gentiles and to all people as made clear at the Baptism by St John the Baptist in the Jordan. The Light of the World is confirmed as having come by the presence of the Trinity. He was the beloved Son with whom the Father was well pleased.

This feast now ends the Christmas season. In recent memory it was in fact the Feast of Candles that did this, it was however also known as the Presentation of the Lord in The Temple (as well as the Purification of Mary) it is this title that has been reinforced.

Jesus is taken to Jerusalem, forty days after his birth as was the custom and presented to God as well as an offering of the poor, two doves. Simeon however sees much more than this offering and makes the profound statement of who this child is. Speaking words similar to those of Isaiah centuries back he says he can now die

‘For my eyes have seen your salvation which has been prepared for all nations the light to enlighten the gentiles and give glory to Israel your people’.

This feast then prepares us for the reality that this Light this Saving Light, cannot be extinguished and though He will suffer and die he will rise again and will shine ever the more brightly throughout time to lead his people.

Candles therefore not only represent Jesus as The Light but also are used to emphasise the importance of being guided or being the light to others. At Baptism the child or adult receives a baptismal candle to remind them that they too have to be lights and that they have the light of Jesus in their heart. The little candle is lit from the paschal candle. How beautiful are the ceremonies of Holy Week and the entry of the lighted candle heralding the Resurrection of Jesus. So too, the lighting of the Paschal candle and the lowering of the candle into the newly blessed water as the symbol of dying and rising to new life. Similarly the candles held by the congregation and lit from the Paschal one and then lit again at the renewal of Baptismal promises. In some countries a candle is lit when someone is dying

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*God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all," Pope Francis I said in a short homily, quoting from the Gospel of John.
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to remind all that they are going to meet Jesus and that He will guide the soul. There are also other times when candles tell us about the importance of light and the power of light over darkness. First Holy Communion Children often carry a lighted candle to remind them that they are now being lighted in Communion with Jesus and that they have to shine brightly for others.

The practice of lighting candles in order to obtain some form of favour probably has its origin in the custom of burning lights at the tombs of the martyrs in the Catacombs. The lights burned as a sign of solidarity with Christians still on earth, because the lights continually burned as a silent vigil they became known as vigil lights. Vigil lights, meaning waiting or watching, are often used to tell us to keep attentive as we pray. How beautiful are the vigil lights on Maundy Thursday as we wait with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.

Votive lights are used to be a symbol of petition for a favour or remembrance of someone in prayer. Especially during November these are lit in the name of those who have died in the preceding year, or at Christmas to recall those who cannot be with us anymore.

Churches also have twelve candles around the walls which are to remind us of the twelve Apostles and are lit at the consecration of the church. Look out for them as they are often missed. The readings at Mass are often accompanied by candle- light bearers (Acolytes).

There is no shortage therefore of the uses of candles in or liturgies and homes. Indeed we could have the practice of lighting a candle blessed at ceremonies on our tables or at meal time. It is sometime helpful to light a candle during prayer times at home as a focus on Jesus' 'presence' among us. This is sometimes carried out in prayer groups. Lighting a candle can be a form of prayer in its own right.



True light will always shine brighter and defeat darkness. The comfort of light when all seems to be bleak and desolate is a constant reminder that Jesus is always with us. After the 9/11 tragedy, lit candles figured prominently both at the site and in the special

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concert affirming the power of goodness over the darkness of evil.

Not only does light give us clearer sight but it can lead us to safety. If we turn off the light we can stumble in darkness. We can fall flat on our faces. If we turn away from the light that Jesus gives, us to guide, us His brightness will help us not to fall down but to continue on our journey through life. It is no mistake that when the world was created light was an essential element. When we go through trials and suffering, when we lose loved ones, when all that we have seems to be gone, His light encourages us. Sometimes we cannot see or experience that light. Sometimes our lives and prayer seem to be in deep fog or the light seems to be totally missing. It is at these times that He may remain hidden but because He is Light he enlightens us in a way that through trust keeps us from stumbling as we trust in Him. We do not belong to the darkness. We have been saved. St Paul expresses this perfectly in a letter (Thessalonians 5) *"It is not as if you live in the dark, my brothers for that day to overcome you like a thief. No you are all the sons of light and sons of the day: we do not belong to the night or to darkness. Or again the words of Zachariah 'He will give light to those in darkness, those who dwell in the shadow of death and guide us in the way of peace'.*

As much as Jesus revealed his light to all and the candle reveals its light for all to see so too, we must be the light to others in their sorrows and pain and acts as guides.

'There was a man once who was walking home from work. It was deep night and bitterly cold. He had 'lantern lit' and because of the extreme cold he put it under his coat to keep warm. He knew the way... every inch of it. He was a miner and knew the layout. A sudden gust of wind caught his coat and a light shone out and he realised he was within inches of a steep drop. The light had shone at the right moment. Maybe it shone for Him but maybe for others following.' We must let our lights shine.

Prayer

True light of the world, Lord Jesus as you enlighten all men for their salvation give us grace we pray to herald your coming by preparing the way of justice and peace .

"If we love God and our brothers and sisters, we walk in the light; but if our heart is closed, if we are dominated by pride, deceit, self-seeking, then darkness falls within us and around us," Pope Francis I

Feasts in February 2nd Presentation of the Lord.
3rd St Blaise, Blessing of Throats (with candles)
11th Our lady of Lourdes, Day of prayer for the Sick
14th St Valentine's Day. Prayer for married Couples