

6 December 2009

Candles in Church – a First Sunday explanation

This is the first of our monthly columns about things we have/do in church and why. Since this is the first Sunday in Advent, a season filled with candle light, we begin with candles.

Candles on the Altar: customarily there are two prominent candlesticks on the Altar, which are only lit for the Eucharist. They acknowledge that we are gathered at the Lord's Table for our feast.

Candles near the Altar:

The Advent wreath has five candles. These may be three purple, one pink, and one white; or four purple and one white; or four blue and one white. The colored candles represent the coming of the light of Christ into the world. The closer we are to the Nativity, the more candles are lit (one on the first Sunday of Advent, two on the second, etc.) The white candle in the middle represents Christ, the light from God which came into our world at the Incarnation. Sometimes this candle is present from the beginning; sometimes it does not appear until the first Christmas service. The candles remain until the Feast of Epiphany when the light of Christ spreads to the wide world

The 'torches' are candles on sticks which are carried in procession, to light the way in for the leaders of the service and which are then put in stands to become 'pavement lights' – that is candles which stand on the ground in the Chancel to illuminate our worship.

The Tabernacle light is a candle in a glass jar which is placed in a red glass holder which hangs near the Tabernacle (a locked cupboard in which the Reserved Sacrament [the blessed bread and wine] is kept.) This candle is always lit as long as the Reserved Sacrament is in the Tabernacle – which generally means always, except from the end of the evening service on Maundy Thursday until the first service of Easter. This light symbolizes our sense that Christ is there in the Sacrament.

The Paschal (or Easter) Candle is brought into the Chancel for the Great Fifty Days of Easter as well as for all baptisms and funerals. It represents resurrection life, the life of Christ beyond the grave. Because this life is eternal, the candle is lit before the service and remains until all have departed during Easter, reminding us that there is no ending to our life in Christ, whether or not we are in church worshipping. a

The large standing Candelabra are used at weddings and other special celebrations. They are sometimes referred to as 'office lights' because they used to be lit for Morning Prayer when that took the place of the Eucharist on Sunday morning, and the Altar Candles were not lit. Candles and lamps have always been associated with worship and celebration, so many churches have special candle holders or other ways to add candlelight at special times.

Other candles in the church:

Small candles along the walls and in the windows: These tea lights in glass holders add extra light and beauty to special services, such as Christmas, Easter, and weddings.

Votive candles in the stand in the Chapel are lit by individuals offering special prayers. The candles themselves represent those prayers rising to God, and giving light into the hearts of those praying and prayed for. Unlike other candles which are lit for the start of a service and extinguished at the end. These remain lit until they burn out of their own accord, representing the continuity of prayer.

Candles at Taizé: At the Taizé service, there is an opportunity for the participants to light a candle of prayer at the front of the church, as part of their offering to God. There are also numerous candles of assorted colors, shapes, and sizes in front of the icon representing the wide variety of God's creatures, together giving glory to their creator and offering their own prayers.