

The Lighting of Lights A Reason

Light is so basic to human experience, so central to the experience of life, that it is a synonym for Christ, who said, "I am the Light of the World." The Liturgy of the Hours, or Divine Office, is sung or recited at times related specifically to the state of the light. The seasons of the Church are also regulated relative to the solstices and equinoxes: Christmas at midwinter, Easter in the spring, Annunciation at the spring equinox, etc.

A feature of Catholic liturgy that makes it most recognisable is the presence of candles. From being a physical necessity, these have passed into the world of symbol; and the ability to be fed by symbolism is essential to the business of liturgy.

A Candle

The candle is an archaic form of lamp, and is open to many symbolic meanings. It has a living flame, fed by its own substance, which is eventually exhausted, when the flame dies. It is made of wax, the gift of virgin bees: this has been from earliest times a symbol of sacrificial industry, work for God which asks for no reward.

A candle can represent a person. At the Easter Vigil, the Church's central liturgical act, the Paschal Candle is greeted, adorned, and honoured as a symbol of the risen Lord. At other times, the faithful hold separate candles as a sign of their own "illumination" by the Light of the World, their personal faith.

Lighting A Candle For Prayer

We light a candle for prayer, extinguishing electric lights which can carry with them a sense of banality. The level of illumination is lowered, to distance the things which carry the connotation of work. A single flame can gather and concentrate our attention. The journey within can begin. The light flickers, but survives. There is a sense of natural rhythm and continuity, like the beating of the heart. By candlelight we can listen to the quiet, inner voice of prayer.

Lighting A Candle For Prayer In Church

When people gather for private prayer together, their presence to each other is not a distraction. Their shared quiet can be immensely encouraging; we each uphold one another in the quiet work of prayer. The lighting of a candle for each person creates a shared symbol of the praying community. The flickering of many flames symbolises the gathering of all our lives.

Leaving A Candle Alight In Church

When the time of prayer ends, we set off to work. The candle remains, burning itself out, in the place of prayer. Others who enter the church find it still burning. It is a small living - and therefore transient - relic of our prayer, and its discovery can pass on a little of our witness to the next visitor. It is a sign that we are still living the life of prayer, wherever we have gone. It is a silent greeting, in the shared peace of Christ.