

## **CANDLES**

Candles have been used in churches since the early days of Christianity on many occasions. According to Ibn al-'Assal's *Kitab al-Qawanin* (Book of Canon Law) and the DIDASCALIA, candles must be lighted during all services, a reference to the words of Jesus Christ, "I have come as a light into the world" (Jn. 12:46).

Inside the sanctuary two candlesticks are placed either on the altar or close to it, one to the north and the other to the south. Likewise two candelabra stand outside the sanctuary, representing the Old and the New Testaments. During processions, bishops enter the church preceded by priests and deacons carrying lighted candles and chanting relevant hymns.

In the evening and the morning offering of incense, standing at the sanctuary door and looking eastward, his hands extended and holding in his right hand the cross with three lighted candles, the priest says the [prayer](#) of Lord, have mercy upon us. Then he turns toward the people and blesses them three times with the cross and the three lighted candles.

When the scriptures are read, the reader holds a lighted candle. When the priest or deacon reads the Gospel, two deacons, one to his right and one to his left, stand holding lighted candles. This established tradition was mentioned by Saint Jerome (c. 342-420): "Through all the churches of the east, when the Gospel is to be read, lights are kindled, though the sun is already shining; not indeed to dispel darkness, but to exhibit a token of joy; . . . and that under the figure of bodily light, that light may be set forth of which we read in the psalter, "Thy word is a lantern unto my feet, and a light unto my paths.'"

In the performance of the [Divine Liturgy](#) the deacons serving in the sanctuary hold lighted candles, particularly at the choosing of the Eucharistic Bread; the Procession of the Lamb, crossing the oblations, the

sanctification, the fraction, the confession, and the communion. During the liturgy of consecration of the holy chrism, the clergy hold candles in a procession, preceding the patriarch, who carries the [myron](#) and the oil of the catechumens to the sanctuary.

Lighted candles are carried during the performance of the church sacraments. In BAPTISM, candles are placed around the font and are also held by all persons attending. Catechumens used to be given lighted candles immediately after being baptized as a token of the inner light they had just acquired. Saint CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (c. 315-386) vividly describes the practice that illuminated the dark night during Easter celebration at the Church of the Resurrection: “. . . on the eve of the Savior’s resurrection, and at the doors of the Church of the Anastasis, the white-robed band of the newly baptized was seen approaching from the neighboring baptistery, and the darkness was turned into day in the brightness of unnumbered lights.” Likewise Saint [GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS](#) (329-389) refers to the symbolic [meaning](#) of these lighted candles: “The lamps which thou wilt kindle are a mystical sign of that lamp-bearing from thenceforth, wherewith we, bright and virgin souls, will go forth to meet the Bridegroom” (*Oration* 40.46, cols. 425-26).

In the celebration of the sacrament of holy unction of the sick, seven wicks and seven candles are set on a table before the sanctuary screen. Each time a priest begins to read one of the seven prayers for the sick, he lights a wick and a candle until all the prayers have been read and all wicks and candles have been lighted.

Candles are also lighted when the sacrament of Matrimony is performed, and during the ceremony of betrothal.

Candles are used in a special way on Good Friday, when the services begin in early morning and last past sunset. The sanctuary is closed, and the service is conducted in the nave of the church where candles burn only at the pulpits, where readings are conducted.

In mid-afternoon the condemnation of Christ from the Gospels is read. As the reader reaches the passage “and from the sixth hour there was darkness” (Mt. 27:45; Mk. 15:33; Lk. 23:44) the candles are extinguished. At the twelfth hour the black curtain concealing the sanctuary is drawn back to reveal candles burning again on the altar.

Two icons of the crucifixion and the burial are taken in procession around the sanctuary and the church, as deacons facing the icons carry the lighted candles during the procession. The icon of the burial is then returned to the sanctuary, wrapped in white cloth and laid on the altar. Two candles symbolizing angels are placed one at the head and one at the feet of Christ.

Lighted candles are usually held during such celebrations, particularly on Easter Eve, called [Saturday](#) of light. At the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, which is overcrowded with people on this occasion, when the sacred light is kindled following the circuit around the Holy Sepulcher, all candles are lighted, and the church is transformed into a blazing mass of light.

Candles are also lighted to commemorate the martyrs, “who . . . shall shine like the brightness of the firmament” (Dn. 12:3).

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA relates how at the funeral of Constantine the Great in 337, “his coffin was surrounded by candles burning in candlesticks of gold, presenting a marvelous spectacle, and such as no one under the light of the sun had ever seen on earth” (*Life of Constantine*, 4.66).

Candles are still burned during the various stages of funerals. It is customary to lay the body in the coffin, keeping it in state there before the church service for a few hours, for mourners to pay their last respects. Tall candlesticks with burning candles are positioned at the head and foot of the casket at home and later during the church service.

It is an old practice to light candles before the icons of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the martyrs, and the saints. In the words of Germanus, patriarch of Constantinople (c. 634-733), “Let it not scandalize some, that lights are before the sacred icons and sweet perfumes. For such rites have been devised to their honor . . .”(Labbe, 1971-1972, Vol. 7, p. 313).

The annals of the church abound in cases of individuals whose prayers were answered and requests granted through the [intercession](#) of the saints, and who light candles in the church in recognition of such favors.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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## **ARCHBISHOP BASILIOS**

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