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The meaning of the use of the candle, the incense and the Vigil oil lamp

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The word candle derives from Latin *candela* = candle.

In the Christian Church the candle is placed in front of the holy icons. That which is placed in front of the crucifix, in the sanctuary, is always kept lit and that is why it is so called "Sleepless" vigil lamp.

A Candle is also placed on the iconostasis of the house and is lit every day according to Orthodox tradition ...

A habit that maintains the deep Christian symbolism with the Light of Christ that enlightens every man that warms up the hope, consoles and accompanies the endless hours of solitude.

The lighting of the oil-lamp carries the symbolism that is offered as a sacrifice of respect and honor to God and His saints. It also symbolizes the light of Christ that illumines every man, and also symbolizes the familiar commandment of our Lord that we Christians should be, the lights of the world.



"His face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light."(Matth.17:2).

The oil that burns in our oil-lamps, "τον του Θεού υπεμφαίνει έλαιον" writes St. Symeon of Thessaloniki, the mercy of God that was revealed when the dove returned to Noah's Ark to signify the cessation of the flood, having in the beak an olive branch, or when Jesus, prayed at length, He watered with the sweat of His clots the olive tree, under the branches of which He knelt on the dreadful night on the Mount of Olives. Of course, we all know how infinitely superior of the material light is the internal light, a light lit by the Holy Spirit. So wrote the God-bearer Father Gregory Nazianzus: "Φωτίσωμεν... γλώσσαν" "Let us lit...the tongue" and the commentator adds: was this achieved?

The oil symbolizes the infinite mercy of God, but the oil-lamps also, symbolize the Church that is imparting of the Divine Mercy and lighting. They also symbolize the saints themselves that their light shone according to the word of the Lord, "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Mt. 5:16) There are many reasons for which the Orthodox we should lit the oil-lamp, for example:

1. In order to remind us of the need for prayer,
2. to illuminate the space and to drive-away the darkness where the

evil forces are dominant

3. to remind us that Christ is the only true light and the faith in Him is light,

4. to remind us that our lives should be bright,

5. In order to remind us that as the candle requires our own hand to light thus the soul requires the hand of God, that is His Grace,

6. to remind us that our will must be burnt and be sacrificed

7. For the love of God, and many more.

Needless to say, that the vigil-oil should be an olive oil and the best possible quality. Besides, the Lord prayed in the garden of Olives and the temple with the oil-lamps is converted to a new garden and mercy (oil) and Divine Mercy, their oil reminds us of the compassion of God and their light in our lives, that should be bright and holy.

The shedding of light in the temple symbolizes the divine light of God's presence that illuminates the hearts not only of neophytes but all Christians as well. The Lord revealed this great truth about Himself in the following words: "I am the light of world" (John 8:12). He is light not only because of His luminous teachings, but mainly due to His luminous presence. This is confirmed by the particular miraculous Transfiguration, where "His face did shine as the sun, and

His raiment was white as the light." (Matth. 17:2).

In the Symbol of Faith (The Creed), the Son of God is presented as "light from light." In the service of Vespers the hymnographer also presents the Lord as "Joyful Light." And the Christians with the mysteries of the Church and their spiritual struggle can receive the light of the grace of the Holy Spirit and to radiate it with their lives.

In "the sermon of the mount" the Lord advising His disciples told them: "Ye are the light of the world Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16). Here it is clear that the light of Christ's disciples is the good works of their holy spiritual life. The saints, in the after-life will be like the Lord, they will become "gods by grace." The Lord expresses this clearly with His prophetic words: "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (Matt. 13:43).

The Candle

And the candle also symbolizes the Light of Christ, the flame of faith. Behind the lighting of the candle lies deeper symbolism.



Simeon of Thessalonica tells us that the candle that lights has six symbols:

1. It symbolizes the purity of our soul, because it is made from pure beeswax.
2. Also the plasticity of our soul, since it becomes easier to engrave on it anything.
3. Also the Divine Grace because the wax comes from the fragrant flowers.
4. Moreover it symbolizes divinity, which we must reach because the wax is mixed with fire and it gives it food.
5. And the light of Christ also shows, as it burns and brightens the darkness.
6. Lastly it symbolizes the love and peace that should characterize every Christian, because the candle burns down when it illuminates, but it also comforts man with its light in the darkness.

Lighting a candle we must remember that we have to live in the light that we received with our baptism. That is why we call baptism enlightenment as well. For this reason during baptism we hold candles. This light is the fire of Pentecost, the light of the Holy Spirit. And this Light is renewed within us in our souls every time we participate in the Divine Liturgy and whenever we receive Holy Communion and we pray. That is why at the end of every Divine Liturgy we chant: "We have

seen the true light! We have received the heavenly Spirit! We have found the true Faith! Worshipping the undivided Trinity.

The light of the Church though, we have to say, saves better its symbolism and helps the soul to come to contrition when it is natural, as in most of our monasteries, i.e. consisting of candles and oil lamps that burn rather than artificial i.e. derived from electricity.

The candles, like the oil is an offering to God of these material goods that He gives us (Your own from Your own) and they symbolize on the one hand the candles, the supple and soft soul and the unifying power of the Holy Spirit because candles are made, so at least they should be made, from the pure wax that the bee makes, that in order to prepare the wax collects pollen from various flowers. For this reason, the candle reminds us also the diligence of the bee and the fact that collects everything that is good and rejects everything that is filthy. The wax also it brings to mind the way how the Fire i.e. the Divinity, is joined with the pliable soul and it softens her but it also illumines her and all who are in communion with her. The candle, as it burns, illuminates its surroundings.

Thus also the conscious Christian, when sacrificed for the love of God, illuminates his fellows and shows them the way of salvation.

When the believer enters the church, should light a candle in the candelabra one for the living and a candle for the deceased relatives and acquaintances. But if some from the living have particular problems, then it is good to light candles for every individual. The lighting of the candle should always be accompanied by words of prayer. For the living we will ask the mercy and the protection of God, while for the departed the divine mercy and their eternal salvation.

The pure wax produced from virgin bees symbolizes the human nature of Christ which came from the immaculate and virgin Mary. The three-candle holder of the Bishop symbolizes the Holy Trinity, while the two candle holder the two natures of Christ. The candles or the large candles that are lit at Baptism symbolize the spiritual light that the neophyte receives. The candles of the funeral, of the grave site and of the memorials symbolize the light of Christ, into which we hope for the departed to enter. The Chandelier symbolizes the triumphant Church in the heavens. The candles or the oil-lamps symbolize the saints. On major feast days at the Monasteries they circle around the Chandelier, to reveal that the saints in the heavenly places simultaneously are celebrating and dance together with the earthly Church of Christ.

The Incense

Incense is called from the ancient times the aromatic resin or gum that comes from incisions in the trunk of the tree lebanon hence incense. At home it is advisable to be offered incense regularly and always be accompanied with prayer. The spiritual symbolisms of incense are:

1. The incense above all symbolizes prayer that ascends the throne of God. "Let my prayer rise as

an incense before You..." it is the momentum of soul turning upwards. And at the same time symbolizes our ardent desire for our prayer to become acceptable "as a sweet scent of spiritual fragrance." St. John Chrysostom writes "As the incense in and of itself is good and fragrant, then it is that it reveals its fragrance, when the fire speaks. Thus it is with prayer, it is good in and of itself, but it becomes better and more fragrant when it is done with the ardor of the soul; when the soul becomes the censer and lights a strong fire." That is, when one is praying, it is desirable to burn incense at home.



2. It also symbolizes the fiery tongues of the Holy Pentecost when the Lord sent forth to His Disciples His Holy Spirit "like tongues of fire." The prayer that the priest says, when blessing the incense at the oblation he says "To Thee, O Lord we offer incense as a scent of spiritual fragrance; accept it at Thy Heavenly Altar and send down upon us in return, the Grace of the Holy Spirit." With the incense for example we ask the Lord to send us His holy spiritual grace. That is why the believers when they are censured by the Priest, slightly bow their head as a sign of acceptance of this grace. St. Simeon of Thessalonica interprets as follows the significance of incense, "*it shows the grace from the heavens and freely given to the world through Jesus Christ and the fragrance of the Spirit and again ascending into heaven through Him*"
3. Fragrant incense symbolizes moreover the praise addressed to God. The burning of incense denotes

the worship and the atonement. And the pleasant feeling, created by the smell of incense in the whole space of the Holy Temple means the filling of our hearts by the divine delight, that is the fruit of our love for God. In this case every believer transforms in "fragrance of Christ."

4. And the censer where the coals are burnt and the incense is placed on them, symbolizes the belly of the Theotokos, which held in her bowels of the Godhead bodily, that is "a consuming fire" without undergoing damage or alteration. According to St. Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople "The censer shows the humanity of Christ, the fire the divinity and the fragrant smoke is suing the fragrance of the Holy Spirit in procession." Elsewhere "The abdomen of the censer it is understood within us to be the sanctified womb of the Theotokos carrying the divine charcoal Christ in which dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily. Wherefore and the fragrant scent is send upon fragrancng the universe." In simple words Saint Kosmas the Aetolian describes this symbolism, saying "The censer means the Lady, the Theotokos. As the charcoal is inside the censer and does not burn, so the Lady Theotokos received Christ and did not get burnt, but all the more she was enlightened.

With the incense offering at the hour of prayer the uplifting of the soul is assisted toward high "let us lift up our hearts." As the incense heated in coal is ascending upwards fragrancng the environment, so the soul of the believer with strong faith must flap upward with sweet smell, detached from material concerns. The base of the censer indicates the humanity of Christ, the fire His divinity and the fragrant smoke "informs" us the leading fragrance of the Holy Spirit.

Moses obeying God constructed and placed on the stage of Martyrdom altar of incense (Ex. 30: 1-10). The method of preparation of incense was taught by the Lord Himself (Ex. 30: 34-36). The offering of incense

in the Old Testament was God's command. Incense had to be offered at the beginning of the day in the morning and evening with the lighting of Light (Ex. 30: 7-8).

This good habit was introduced to the Christian worship as well. Particularly incense is offered at Vespers with the joyous light of the sunset and the chanting of the second verse of Psalm 140, where it is chanted "Let my prayer rise as incense before thee." We ask the Lord, that our prayer may ascend to His throne, as a fragrant incense rising to heaven.



This devotional medium creates a climate of devout prayer and attracts the sanctifying grace of God. The blessing of incense at the ceremony of the offertory clearly shows the great benefit that effects the congregation from the offering of incense. Characteristically the liturgizing priest says: "To Thee, O Lord we offer incense as a scent of spiritual fragrance; accept it at Thy Heavenly Altar and send down upon us in return, the Grace of the Holy Spirit." (i.e.: Incense we offer to Thee, O Christ Almighty God, as a sweet spiritual scent; this, having accepted to Your heavenly Altar, send back to us the grace of Your Holy Spirit). It causes a surprise that the liturgizing priest uses similar words also for the offering of the Precious Gifts of the Divine Liturgy: "That our loving God who has received them at His holy, heavenly, and spiritual altar as an offering of spiritual fragrance, may in return send upon us divine grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit, let us pray." (i.e.: Aiming our man befriending God,

having accepted them in His holy and heavenly and spiritual altar as a sweet scent, to send back to us the divine grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit, let us ask).

When the priest censures the faithful, they must bow reverently expecting the blessing and grace of God. When the priest censures the icons of the saints, asks for

their intercessory prayers to the Lord for the help of the Church militant members. Unfortunately many Christians when the Priest censures them, remain motionless (much like columns). And this, of course, due to ignorance! The slight bowing is a sign that we are engaged in what is taking place and a sign of elementary response of kindness to the

priest who prays for our behalf!

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