



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we use a Paschal Candle?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Fire has long been a sign of God's presence. The Old Testament is full of examples: the burning bush on Mount Sinai, the pillar of fire in the desert, the tabernacle lamps, and the sacrificial fires on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem. Early Christians rather naturally viewed the kindling of new fire as a symbol of the presence of their resurrected Lord, the new pillar of fire.

In Jerusalem, the earliest Christians blessed and lighted candles every Saturday night. By at least the fifth or sixth century, the custom had become associated with celebrations of the Resurrection, and paschal candles had found their way into the liturgy of the Western church.

In the medieval church, allegorical meaning was ascribed to every aspect of the paschal candle. Unlighted, it represented Christ's death and burial; lighted, it represented the splendor and glory of Christ's resurrection. The wick represented Christ's humanity, and the halo of flame represented his divinity. Other candles lighted from the paschal candle symbolized Christ giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples.

For us, the symbolism of Christ's triumph over the darkness of sin and death is preeminent. This symbolism is most apparent when the paschal candle is introduced each year to the congregation in the Easter Vigil on Easter Eve. When the Vigil begins, the church is dark, symbolic of the darkness of the sepulcher that held the crucified Christ. A new fire is kindled, and the paschal candle is lighted, representing the Risen Christ, the Light of the world.



Symbolically, this is the fire from which all light is ignited. Traditionally, before lighting the candle from the new fire, the candle is inscribed with a cross, an *alpha* and *omega*, and the current year. This reinforces the point that Christ is present among us now and throughout eternity. The following words traditionally accompany the inscribing: "Christ

yesterday and today [cross], the beginning and the end [Alpha and Omega]. His are all times [2] and ages [0]; to Christ be glory and dominion [*year*], through endless ages [*year*]. Amen." Five grains of incense may be inserted into the cross with wax nails (usually provided with a purchased paschal candle), representing the five wounds of Christ, as indicated during the Easter proclamation. If the candle already has the symbols affixed to it, the minister may trace the symbols as the words are spoken.

As the candle is carried in procession into the dark nave, so Christ lights our way out of darkness. During this procession, the bearer of the candle lifts it high and sings, "The light of Christ," to which all respond, "Thanks be to God!" Its meaning is even clearer in the Roman rite, which says, "Christ our Light!" There is no missing the point! Christ is present in the midst of the assembly. We are not pretending to reenact Christ's physical resurrection. We are not simply recalling an ancient event when Christ was present. The reality in the message of the resurrection is that the Risen Christ is present here today, with and for us. There is no one particular moment within the procession of light or in the vigil liturgy that we believe to be the exact moment of Christ's resurrection. The ancient Easter proclamation, sung by the light of the paschal candle, says it clearly: "O night truly blessed which alone was worthy to know the time and the hour wherein Christ arose again from hell!" We are gathered in darkness to wait and look for the resurrection. Gradually we enter into the reality that Christ is risen and is present among us. (For musical settings of the Easter proclamation, see *Music Sourcebook for Lent and the Three Days* in Resources).

Throughout the fifty days of Easter, the paschal candle traditionally stands near the altar as a symbol of the resurrection. It is lighted for each liturgy during the great fifty days of Easter. (Easter is not over until Pentecost, the fiftieth day!) Ideally, the candle burns continuously from the Vigil of Easter through Pentecost. Since this is usually not practical, the paschal candle should be lighted well before the arrival of worshipers and remain lit until after all have departed. To heighten the symbolism, it could be lighted any time groups of people assemble in or near the nave (meetings, rehearsals, and so forth). If evening prayer is celebrated during the season of Easter, the assembly gathers for prayer around the burning paschal candle. A separate vesper candle is not used.

In some traditions, the paschal candle is extinguished at the reading of the gospel on the Ascension of our Lord. This practice emphasizes the historical presence of Jesus following the resurrection, rather than focusing on the presence of the Risen Christ in our time. The fuller symbolism of the paschal candle calls for letting it remain lighted and central through the entire Easter season.

After the Day of Pentecost, the paschal candle is placed on its stand near the baptismal font as a visual reminder that in our baptism, we are crucified and resurrected with Christ. The candle is lighted at each celebration of Baptism, at which time small baptismal candles are lighted from it for presentation to the baptized or sponsor (see also, ["How can the centrality of baptism be renewed?"](#)). This act is a visual reminder of the integral connection between Baptism and Easter. For funerals (see also, ["What are the marks of a Christian funeral?"](#)), the paschal candle is lighted and placed in its stand at the head of the casket during the funeral rite. In a visual way, the paschal candle visually proclaims the message of Romans 6:3-5 (used at the beginning of the burial liturgy): "In our Baptism we have already died and been raised with Christ."

The paschal candle, sometimes called the Easter candle, should not be confused with the so-called Christ candle, which has no roots in liturgical history but is often seen at the center of Advent wreaths. The paschal candle should be of substantial size, even huge, if its important symbolism is to speak clearly. Even the stand in which it rests should be of great size. It is inappropriate to use an aluminum tube with a candle on a spring or burning oil inside. The Easter proclamation sings the glories of the candle, for it is "fed by the melting wax which the bees, your servants, have made for the substance of this candle." Therefore, to speak authentically, the candle should be made of wax, and the height of the candle should visibly diminish throughout the season and year. Ideally, a new paschal candle is inscribed and lit each year at the Vigil of Easter. This practice can be costly, so you will want to find creative ways to use the remaining wax from the previous year's candle. It is possible to save a great deal of money and involve more members in preparations for the Vigil of Easter by making your own paschal candle.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↪ How can the centrality of baptism be renewed?
- ↪ What are the marks of a Christian funeral?
- ↪ How does worship involve all of our senses?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 🎥 *These Things Matter: Word, Baptism, Communion.* Division for Congregational Ministries, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 1999. Video on sacramental practices.
- 📄 *Worship Formation Study Modules.* ELCA Worship Staff. Sessions that may help a congregation dig deeper into many aspects of worship.

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Leaders Desk Edition.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail and Mons Teig. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Keeping Time, The Church's Years.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.

- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. See especially pp. 74-75.
- 📖 *Music Sourcebook for Lent and the Three Days*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010.
- 📖 *Worship Guidebook for Lent and the Three Days*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- 📖 VanLoon, Ralph R. and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook: A Practical Guide for Parish Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

Other Resources

- 📖 Information on Candle Carving: <http://www.candlecarving.info/>

Paschal candles in various styles are available for purchase from most liturgical candle distributors. Here are some examples of vendors:

- 📖 Cathedral Candles: <http://www.cathedralcandles.com/>
- 📖 Dadant Candles: <http://www.dadantcandles.com/religious/paschal.asp>
- 📖 Marklin Candles: <http://www.marklincandledesign.com/>
- 📖 Will & Baumer: <http://www.willbaumer.com/>
- 📖 C M Almy: <http://www.almy.org>

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