

Chapter 3



Candles: The Inner and The Outer Flame

Someone once called the Orthodox Church “The Candlelight Kingdom.” We have candles at Easter, candles at Epiphany, candles at weddings, candles at baptisms, candles on the altar table, candles when we enter church, candles before icons, candles everywhere. They are so much a part of our worship services, that, visiting a country church in Greece, one person said, “Here where to light a candle is to pray.”

Why do we use candles? If “to light a candle is to pray,” what has prayer to do with lighting candles? Why are they so much a part of Orthodox worship? If to light a candle is a worshipful act, then do I know what is worshipful about it? What, if anything, do candles have to do with God and my faith in Him?

God As Fire and Light

To understand the use and meaning of candles in our worship, we must look to the Bible where God is so often described in terms of fire and light.

We read in Hebrews 12:24, “For our God is a consuming fire.”

When God spoke to Moses in the wilderness, He appeared to him as fire in the burning bush. "And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed" (Exodus 3:2).

When God guided His people to the Promised Land, He used a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. We read in Exodus 13:21-22, "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in the pillar of fire to give them light . . . the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people."

When God appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai, He appeared again as fire. We read in Exodus 19:18, "And Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly."

Speaking of the coming of the Messiah, the Prophet Isaiah speaks of Him in terms of light. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Is. 9:1-2).

Jesus speaks of His presence as fire in Luke 12:49 when He says, "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!"

When the Holy Spirit came to the apostles on the day of Pentecost, He descended upon them in "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:1-4).

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is portrayed in terms of light:

Jesus is "The light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light."

When Jesus was transfigured, His countenance shown brighter than the sun.

It is said of St. Sergius of Radonezh that while he was celebrating the divine liturgy, one of his disciples, Simon, beheld a wonderful vision. While the saint was singing the liturgy, Simon saw a flame hovering over the holy table. As St. Sergius was about to receive the Eucharist, the divine fire coiled itself together and entered the sacred chalice. The presence of God appeared as fire.

Candles, Candles Everywhere

Every time we light a candle, then, the flame and the light should remind us of God Who in the history of salvation has appeared time and again as fire and light. Let us look briefly at the meaning of candles as used in our worship. The Sanctuary Lamp, otherwise known as the Ever-Burning Light (Akoimitos) that burns constantly, usually suspended from the ceiling over the Tabernacle on the Holy Table, reminds us of God's constant presence in our midst. He never leaves us or forsakes us. Other candles are extinguished after services but never the Ever-Burning Light. A symbol of God's unfailing presence in our midst, the flame flickers endlessly. Romano Guardini, meditating on the Eternal Light, said, "Lord, that Ever-Burning Light is like my soul which is at all times in Your Presence."

Many Orthodox Christians light a candle upon entering church. This simple act is deeply meaningful. It means that in the liturgy when the word of God is preached, the Holy Spirit will come to remove the veil (2 Cor. 3:15 and 4:6) of blindness from our eyes, the veil of lack of understanding and make the light of Christ shine in our hearts. Lighting a candle on entering church expresses our belief that Jesus is the Light of the World and that, as His disciple, I am called daily to reflect His light in my life. It reminds us that when we were baptized we received Jesus Who is the Light of the World. Like Him, instead of cursing the darkness, we are to be lighting candles of hope and love in the lives of people. As we light that candle in the narthex before we enter church we can pray the beautiful words of the Psalmist, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1).

We light the Paschal Candle at the midnight Easter liturgy to remind us that Christ has gone on before us into the darkness of death and has overcome that darkness, transforming it into unwaning light. "Come, receive light from the unwaning light and glorify Christ Who is risen from the dead." The Paschal Candle proclaims our faith that the Resurrected Christ "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in Whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14).

When the priest comes out in procession with the Gospel Book during the liturgy, he is preceded by acolytes carrying candles to show that the word of God, to use words of the Psalmist, is "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." The candles that precede the procession with the Gospel Book speak loud and clear. They tell us that the word of God is light for the darkness in which we walk. Its purpose is to prevent us from stumbling; to show us the way; to lead us home to God.

In some Orthodox churches in the Middle East, I have seen an object resembling an ostrich egg suspended immediately above the flickering flame of hanging votive lights. The symbolism of the ostrich egg has to do with the heat produced by the flame of the votive candle. Just as an ostrich must sit on the egg for a long time in order to slowly hatch it with the heat of its body, so the Christian must remain close to the flame of Christ. He must stay close to the church and must nurture his faith through daily prayer and regular communion with Christ through the Eucharist. Only then will faith grow, develop, mature and come to life. The ostrich egg represents the embryonic state of faith which can spring to life through patient and faithful asceticism, producing a life full of the fruits of the Spirit, a life that will glorify the Trinity.

——— *The Candle At the Presanctified Liturgy* ———

A special rite involving a candle has been incorporated into the Presanctified Liturgy. This rite dates back to the time when it was the purpose of Lent to prepare the catechumens for baptism. While the lesson from Genesis is read, a lighted candle is placed on top of the Gospel book on the holy table. After the lesson, the priest takes the candle and the censer and blesses the congregation with them as he proclaims, "The light of Christ illumines all."

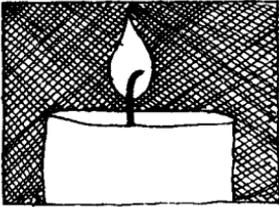
The candle, of course, symbolizes Christ Who is the Light of the World. The fact that it is placed on the Gospel book signifies (1) that Christ is the Light of the World; (2) He is the One Who opened the hearts and minds of His disciples that they might understand the Scriptures; and (3) that all the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.

Like the five wise maidens holding their burning lamps, the bride and groom hold candles in the Sacrament of Matrimony to signify their eagerness to receive the Bridegroom Christ when He comes to bless them through the sacrament.

St. Symeon of Thessalonika, the New Theologian, says that the reason vigil lights are placed before the icons of the saints is to show that without the Light, Who is Christ, the saints are nothing. It is only as the light of Christ shines upon them that they become alive and resplendent.

The Feast of Lights

In the early Church, Epiphany—the day of Christ's baptism—became one of the days on which the pagan converts to Christianity were received into the Church through baptism. Each newly-baptized convert held the baptismal candle during the liturgy. In addition to this, Christians who had already been baptized brought their baptismal candles to church on this day to renew their baptismal vows; to renew the commitment to Christ which they had made at baptism.



As a result, everyone in the congregation held a lighted candle on the feast of Epiphany. The churches became a sea of lights. Hence, this day came to be called in Greek "ta Fota" or the Feast of Lights.

The Baptismal Candle

In the early Church the baptismal candle was a symbol that the one baptized had received Christ Who is the Light of the World. In fact, when given the candle at baptism, the newly baptized was also given the injunction of Jesus, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Kept by the one

baptized, the candle was brought to church on feast days, on the anniversary of one's baptism and for the midnight Easter liturgy. If the person married, the same candle was used at the wedding. If ordained, he would light it at his ordination. When the final hour of life approached, it was lit again as the soul went forth to meet its Judge. The baptismal candle was a constant reminder for the Christian to live and die by the light of Christ.

The baptismal candle may be compared to the lamps used in the story of the maidens who awaited the arrival of Christ the Bridegroom in the darkness of the night. When the neophyte was given the lighted candle, he was urged to keep it to meet Christ at His return like the wise maidens who kept their lamps burning for the coming of the Bridegroom. Thus the candle became a symbol of the perseverance of the baptized soul until Christ's return. Among the ancient Greeks the runner who had won the race was not the man who crossed the line in the shortest time, but the man who crossed it in the least time *with his candle still burning*. Our goal as Christians is that we may cross the line into eternity one day with the light of our baptismal faith still shining brightly.

In fact, in the early Church when presenting the candles to the newly baptized, there existed a tradition of admonishing the neophyte with these words, "Receive this candle and keep it burning constantly so that when the Lord comes in the marriage feast of the virgins you may be able to be ushered with the five wise maidens and all the saints into the heavenly courts of life everlasting."

Fr. John of Kronstadt

Fr. John of Kronstadt has written these inspiring words concerning the use and meaning of candles in Orthodox worship:

The candles and lamps burning in church remind us of spiritual light and fire, as of the Lord's words: I am come a Light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness; and again: I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled? and again: Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for the Lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh

and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately; *and* Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven.

Do not grudge burning a wax taper before the image of the Lord during prayer; remember that you burn it before Light inaccessible, before him who enlightens you with his light. Your candle is as though a burnt offering to the Lord. Let it be a gift to God from your whole heart. Let it remind you that you yourself should also be a burning and shining light. He was, says our Lord of John the Forerunner, a burning and a shining light.

I offer light to the Lord, in order that he may bestow the light of grace, the spiritual light, upon me, that he may lead me from the darkness of sin into the light of the knowledge of God and of virtue; I offer fire that the fire of the grace of the Holy Ghost may be kindled in my heart, and that it may quench the fire of the vices of that miserable heart. I bring a light that I myself may become a light, burning and shining to all that are in the church.

It is well to place candles before the images. But it is still better if you bring as a sacrifice to God the fire of your love for him and your neighbor. It is well that the one should accompany the other. But if you place candles before the images, and have no love for God and your neighbor in your heart, if you are grasping, if you do not live in peace with others—then, your offering to God is useless.¹⁶

Let Your Gift Be the Flame

Maeterlinck recounts an old story that has much food for thought for us today. The story concerns a keeper of the lighthouse on a dangerous and isolated coast. The supply ship was long overdue, and the little community clustered about the lighthouse was in dire straits. Because he loved his neighbors, the lighthouse keeper began sharing with them his surplus stock of oil until

finally the oil was exhausted, and one night the beacon on top of the lighthouse failed to burn. That very night, the belated supply ship, in attempting to make its way into the harbor, went on the rocks, and ship, crew, and supplies were lost.

In concluding the story, Maeterlinck says, "See that you give not away the oil of your lamp . . . let your gift be the flame."

"Let your gift be the flame," This is exactly what Jesus tells us: "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14, 16). As God chose His people of old—the Israelites—to be "a light to the Gentiles," so He has chosen us to be lights to the unbelieving world. Like John the Baptist we are to be burning and shining lights for Jesus. But the question is: How? How can I shine for Jesus? St. Augustine gave the answer centuries ago when he said, "One loving spirit sets another on fire." By our faith, love and hope we are called to light candles of faith, love and hope in others. How easy it is to curse the darkness, but how far better it is to light a candle. If we walk in His light, we will be lighting candles all along the way, bringing not only light but also help and healing to those whose lives we touch.

The Inner Fire

St. John Climacus urges that the life of a repentant person be constantly aflame. The wise and sincere monk is the one who does not allow his inner fire to be extinguished, and who right up to the day he leaves (this life) constantly kindles flame upon flame, ardor upon ardor, longing upon longing, and zeal upon zeal.

This fire is the fire of God's love, poured out in Christ and shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This flame of love kindles an answering fire of faith and love in the believer. It was this flame that burned in the hearts of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus when they said to each other: "Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us by the way . . . ?"

For example, here is a devout Christian woman who spends two days a week serving as a volunteer in a large city hospital. A recovered cancer patient, she spends much of her time radiating hope and cheer to others who are going through the same ordeal. So effective is her ministry that doctors, after visiting a depressed

cancer patient, will write on the bedside chart, "Have Mrs. X spend time with this person." Why? Why Mrs X? Because doctors know that she has an inner light, that her very presence "lights up candles" of faith and hope in people.

The candles we light in church are not to be left in church but are to be carried out into the world. We come to church to "connect," to establish contact with Jesus Who is Fire and Light. As we commune with Him at the Lord's table and receive His word, we bring ourselves to where He kindles and lights the candle of our spirit. As we pray before the Gospel is read in the liturgy, "O Lord and lover of mankind: make the imperishable light of Thy divine knowledge to shine in our hearts . . ." Just as we carry the light of the Paschal Candle to our homes following the midnight Easter liturgy, so, every Sunday, we can leave the liturgy as living candles that have been lit by the Holy Spirit, pushing forth in different directions, scattering the darkness before us as we press on. We have not only "seen the true light," but the Holy Spirit has also kindled the flame of God's love in our hearts. We leave as burning and shining lights.

Once baptized, we become involved in the life style of the kingdom. We are the reflected lights of the great Light, which is Christ. Frightening as it may seem, the world will know Him because it knows us. There are no secret citizens in the kingdom. Either we will let the light of Christ shine through us by what we are, do, and say—or we will by our defections, block out the light.

Two Candles

On a certain altar table there were two candles. One was burning, the other had gone out. It was sad to look at the dark candle. The burning candle was consuming itself, but it gave light and warmth in the process. Darkness was dispelled, and hearts were kindled by looking at the living flame. The other candle that was unlit remained intact, but it failed in its purpose. Looking at those two candles, a person prayed, "Lord, let me not be like this quenched candle. Let me burn away my life in Thy service."

A mother and her small daughter walked past the house in Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln once lived. Seeing the lights burning inside, the little girl said, "Look, Mom. When Mr. Lincoln went away he left the lights on." If we allow Jesus to

light the candle which is our life, the light will shine and the influence of our life will continue long after we die. And it will be said of us, too, that when we left this world we “left the lights on.”

The Soul is A Lamp

St. Symeon the New Theologian declares that God is fire. The Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles at Pentecost in the form of flaming tongues of fire. He compares the soul to a lamp. Just as a lamp must be adorned with a good supply of oil and trimmed wicks in order to produce fire and light, so the soul must be adorned with all virtues, but beyond that it must receive the fire which is the Holy Spirit. God is fire, he says, and through the Holy Spirit searches for material to set on fire with divine love. We are that material. Jesus came to cast fire not on earth but in our hearts and minds. He came to ignite and illumine the lamp of each person’s soul.

We read in Proverbs 20:27, “The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord.” The human spirit remains unfulfilled until it is touched by the divine flame.

All candles have one thing in common: they must be lit in order to be useful. If not, they may as well be pieces of pottery.

God created us in many different sizes, shapes and colors. Each of us has a special talent. But, like candles, we are just a decoration in the world unless we are lit to shine for Him.

The Holy Spirit is the Illuminator

God is the One Who lights us with His Holy Spirit. With that Spirit we glow, we give warmth, we make people happy. Have you ever noticed how a true Christian radiates joy? We often say of a real Christian that he lights up the room when he or she walks in.

In fact, there is a story in “The Sayings of the Desert Fathers” about Abba Lot. We read: “Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, ‘Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and, as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do? Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands towards heaven. His fingers became

like ten lamps of oil and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'"

The Wax, the Wick and the Flame

"The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord." We can use a votive light to illustrate this. We have three ingredients in the votive light: the wax or oil, the wick and the flame. The wax or oil that feeds the wick and keeps it burning consists of our prayers, our contact with the Lord through the Sacraments, the Bible and the Liturgy. The wick is the spirit of man or the soul. The flame or fire is the Holy Spirit Who lights the wick of our spirit and keeps it aflame for Christ.

As we look through the Scriptures we see how often the Holy Spirit has lit the wick of man's spirit. For example, when Mary said "Yes" to the angel, the wick in her became a flame. When Paul saw and heard Christ on the road to Damascus, the wick in him became a flame. When Joseph obeyed the voice of the angel and took Mary to protect her, the wick in him became a flame. The wick in us can be lit or unlit, inert or alive, depending on whether we ask the Holy Spirit to set us aflame, and depending on whether through prayer and faith we provide the oil that keeps the wick burning. Anastasius of Sinai declared that the wick of the soul that burns now will lead to our ultimate transfiguration with Christ. He has the transfigured Lord say, "It is thus that the just shall shine at the resurrection; thus that they shall be glorified; into my condition they shall be transfigured, in this glory they shall be transfigured, to this form, to this image, to this imprint, to this light and to this beatitude they shall be configured, and they shall reign with me, the Son of God." St. Paul writes that in the resurrection of the dead Jesus will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body" (Phil. 3:21). At that time "The Lord God will be shining on them" (Rev. 22:5) and "We shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He really is" (I John 3:27). Daniel describes those in heaven as follows: "The learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven and those who have instructed many in virtue, as bright as stars for all eternity" (Dn. 12:13). What is now only an inner flame will at the resurrection become an outer flame resplendent with God's glory.

Light From Within

It was said of a devout Christian on his death bed: "There was a brightness on his face as he closed his eyes for the last time on earth." When Moses returned from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law in his hands, his countenance shone brightly. So much so, that the people had to shade their eyes before they could look at him. Where does this outer glow come from, if not from the inner flame of God's presence? There is a little votive light that burns in the soul of each true Christian. If this inner light is kept burning, it will produce a joyful glow on the countenance. Most people are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light shining from within.

St. Nicephorus wrote concerning the candle that should burn in the soul of every true Christian:

"You, who desire to capture the wondrous divine illumination of our Savior Jesus Christ—who seek to feel the divine fire in your heart—who strive to sense and experience the feeling of reconciliation with God—who, in order to unearth the treasure buried in the field of your heart and to gain possession of it, have renounced everything worldly—who desire the candles of your souls to burn brightly even now, and who for this purpose have renounced all the world—who wish by conscious experience to know and to receive the kingdom of heaven existing within you—come and I will impart to you the science of eternal heavenly life -."

Implanted at Baptism

This inner light is given to us in baptism. As Fr. George Maloney writes:

"This same transfigured Christ is implanted within us in our baptism as an embryonic life. His glorious light is to blaze forth as we yield to His risen, glorious presence within us. Jesus cannot be more transfigured and glorious than He is in our baptism. But it is we, like the apostles, who do not quite see Him in all His transfiguring light at all times. . . . As we die to the darkness of selfcenteredness in our life,

the light of Christ is not only seen by us, but we begin to experience His transfiguring of us into His same glorious light. . . . By His Spirit living within us, Jesus lives in His risen glory within us. Like a leaven, He permeates from within our every part: body, mind and spirit. Each moment is given to us so that we may surrender ourselves to His inner light and be transformed also through a sharing even now of His glorious resurrection.’’¹⁷

Phosphoroi: Bearers of Light

For the great saints of the Church there was a real vision of the Light of Tabor. It occurred at various times depending on one’s compunction for sin and humility. These saints knew that Jesus, the Light of the World, was shining day and night in their minds and hearts. He was transforming them into a radiant light. They became *phosphoroi*, bearers of the true light. The experience of seeing Jesus as light was so powerful to St. Symeon the New Theologian that he did not know whether he was “in the body or out of the body” (II Cor. 12:2). It was said of Fr. John of Kronstadt: “All is written on Fr. John’s face. He is glowing, shining.” The inner light produces an outer glow. Did not St. Paul say, “Be aglow with the Spirit”? (Rom. 12:11). When the Holy Spirit is present within, how can there not be an outer glow? When Jesus—the light of the World—is shining in the soul, how can there not be an outer radiance? We read in “The Sayings of the Desert Fathers”: “They said of Abba Pambo that he was like Moses, who received the image of the glory of Adam when his face shown. His face shown like lightning, and he was like a king sitting on his throne.”¹⁸

Protect the Flame

Does the flame of God’s presence still burn in your soul? The same inner flame the disciples experienced during their walk with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus when they said, “Did not our hearts burn within us when He walked with us?” We read in that great classic of Orthodox spirituality “The Art of Prayer”:

“But God gave us a bright lamp when He kindled the grace of the Holy Spirit in our souls. But of those

*who have received this light, some have made it brighter and clearer, such as Paul, Peter, and all the saints; but others have quenched it, such as the five foolish virgins or those who suffered shipwreck in the faith. . . . And so Paul says, 'Quench not the Spirit.' . . . What quenches it is an impure life. . . . The flame also goes out when there is not enough oil. . . . The Spirit came to you by God's mercy; and so if it does not find corresponding fruits of mercy in you, it will flee from you. For the Spirit does not make its dwelling in the unmerciful soul. . . . Cast aside everything that might extinguish this small flame which is beginning to burn within you, and surround yourself with everything which can feed and fan it into a strong fire (i.e.) . . . solitude, prayer, meditation.'*¹⁹

Protect the flame. Quench it not. Keep the wick burning through ascesis, i.e., repentance, humility, acts of mercy, fasting, solitude and prayer. Our great task is to care for the inner fire not just in order to warm ourselves, but even more so in order to offer warmth and light to lost travellers. Otherwise we are like the Dutch patriot, Vincent Van Gogh, who wrote to his brother, "Dear Theo: There may be a great fire in our soul, yet no one ever seems to warm himself at it and the passers by only see whiffs of smoke coming through the chimney and go along their way."

St. Seraphim of Sarov wrote, "When both the intellect and the heart are united in prayer, and when the thoughts of the soul are not scattered, the heart is warmed by a spiritual heat, the Light of Christ enlightens it and fills the interior man with peace and joy." This does not mean that it will be all radiance and light when we walk with Christ. The inner darkness will still be there. We shall have to struggle against it. But it shall never prevail. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). We may not shine brightly, and sometimes our lives will be only a glimmer of what they ought to be. But even so, they will be of the light and not of the darkness.

Simone Weil writes in her autobiography of being warmed by the inner flame of a devout Christian she met:

There was a young English Catholic . . . from whom I gained my first idea of the supernatural power

of the sacraments because of the truly angelic radiance with which he seemed to be clothed after going to communion.'

I Am the Lighthouse

A newly commissioned navy captain took great pride in his first assignment to be in command of a battleship. One stormy night the captain saw a light moving steadily in their direction. He ordered the signalman to send the following message.

“Change your course ten degrees to the south.”

The reply came back.

“Change your course ten degrees to the *north*.”

The captain was determined not to give way to another vessel, and so he sent a counter message.

“Alter your direction ten degrees. I am the *captain!*”

The answer flashed back promptly.

“Alter your direction. I am a lighthouse!”

There are times when we are like that captain. Self-will sets us on a collision course. We stubbornly insist on our own way until the lighthouse of God’s word penetrates and reveals the rocky shore ahead. And, if we’re smart, we do what the captain must have done. We obey.

May the candle we use so often in our Orthodox worship serve to remind us of God’s word shining as a beacon in the darkness to lead us away from the destructiveness of sin to the haven of God’s presence.

The Growth of the Inner Light

A Monk of the Eastern Church in his book “The Year of Grace of the Lord” associates the growth of the inner light with the progress of the liturgical year:

“We have already underlined the importance of the theme of light in the Byzantine liturgical year: this divine light first appears with the birth of Jesus, it grows with Him; on Easter night it triumphs over the darkness; at Pentecost it reaches its full zenith. Pentecost is ‘the midday flame.’ But this development, which the liturgical year expresses, must correspond to a growth of the inner light in our soul. The riches

and symbolism of the liturgical year are worth nothing if they do not help this 'inner light' to guide our life.'

He continues, speaking now of the three conversions in the stages of growth in the spiritual life of a Christian:

*"We have said, too, that in spiritual life three stages can be discerned which are comparable to three conversions. The first conversion is the meeting of the soul with our Lord, when He is followed as a Friend and as a Master. The second conversion is a personal experience of pardon and salvation, of the cross and of the resurrection. The third conversion is the coming of the Holy Spirit into the soul like a flame and with power. It is by this conversion that man is established in a lasting union with God. Christmas or Epiphany, then Easter, and finally Pentecost correspond to these three conversions. Alas! It is probable that we have not yet been transformed into a living flame by the many Pentecosts with which already, year after year, we have been liturgically associated. But at least it is good never to lose sight of what graces, what possibilities each Pentecost brings."*²⁰

Jesus and the Inner Light

If the candle we light in church is just an outward flame; if it does not give expression to the inner flame of the Holy Spirit that burns in our minds and hearts, then the outward act of lighting a candle becomes an empty symbol devoid of meaning. Jesus once told His disciples that there were twelve hours of daylight, during which they could walk without stumbling; but when this world's light went out, and night fell, they would stumble unless they had an inner light to guide them. Jesus had this inner light which guided Him in the dark moments of His life. Through what He did for us at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, He came to plant this light in us.

The Inner Light in Byzantine Icons

The concept of the inner light has been incorporated into Byzantine iconography. In icons the light of God resides in the

inner person and emerges from within. There are no shadows since shadows are seen only when there is outer light. The Source of this inner light, of course, is the Holy Spirit and it is usually expressed through a glow on the face of the one depicted on the icon, which is usually contemplative as one who is looking within. This is in contrast to religious paintings of the West where the light is shown as coming from an outside source with shadows and an oversized halo.

The candles we light in church, then, should be but an outer expression of the light planted in us by Jesus at baptism. In the words of St. Paul, "For it is the God Who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'" (II Cor. 4:6).

A Word of Caution

A note of caution here. There are many cults that emphasize the Inner Light. They have good things to say about the inner light and the guidance they receive from it. However, by "inner light" they do not mean what we mean: the presence of the Trinity within us. Inner light to them means their own light that emerges from their own thinking. It has nothing to do with God. It is, in fact, a Godless humanism. As G. K. Chesterton so well said, "That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones."

A Christmas Candle in the Window

There is a beautiful Christmas tradition in some European countries of placing a candle in the windows of homes on Christmas Eve. This is done in honor of the Christ Child. If Mary and Joseph are out that night looking for lodging, the candle in the window is a sign of hospitality and welcome to them. But Mary and Joseph are not with us any more. So, the candles indicate to travellers and strangers that there is room for them in those homes on Christmas Eve. Any who are in need are invited in, fed, and sheltered in the name of Christ.

If the inner flame of God's presence is really burning within us, it will express itself outwardly as a sign of hospitality and welcome to all who are lost, offering them the warmth and the

light of Christ. It will be an inviting flame, transforming us into burning and shining lights for Christ.

A Son of Light

Legend tells us that once a zealous young man went to St. Francis of Assisi. He asked the saint to teach him how to preach.

“Gladly,” said Francis. “Come with me.”

All afternoon the young man followed Francis. They paused beneath a tree, and Francis stooped to restore a fallen bird to its nest. They went on and stopped in a field where Francis bent his back to help the laborers load the hay onto a cart. From there they went to the village square, where Francis lifted a bucket of water from the well for an old woman and carried it home for her.

Each time they stopped, the young man was certain that he would hear a sermon—but no wise words of great truth proceeded from the saint’s mouth. Finally they went into the church—but Francis only knelt silently to pray.

At last, they returned to the place from whence they had started. “But when,” the young man asked, “are you going to teach me how to preach?”

Francis smiled. “I just did.”

Francis was a son of light. His entire life shone as a candle for the Lord. “The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord” (Prov. 20:27).

There is much darkness in the world today. Could it be that the darkness is an indictment of us as Christians? As Thomas Merton wrote, “We are supposed to be the light of the world. We are supposed to be a light to ourselves and to others. That may well be what accounts for the fact that the world is in darkness.”

Hold A Candle As You Watch and Wait

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives.

One day in 1789, the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand.

Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, “The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is

not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.”

Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we are to be lights for Christ as we watch and wait.

Let God light the fire of His Presence in the fireplace of your heart that you may become a living candle for the Lord. In the beautiful words of Vladimir Lossky: “The fire of grace, kindled in the hearts of Christians by the Holy Spirit, makes them shine like tapers before the Son of God.”

After the Apostles were baptized “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” on Pentecost, they went about lighting fires in others. They did nothing coldly. They were passionate in their love for Jesus. When they prayed, others were warmed by the fire of their closeness to God. When they spoke of Jesus, others were kindled by their zeal. Fire kindles fire. A Christian is not a Christian until his spirit has been touched by the fire of God’s Spirit. Then he becomes truly “a candle of the Lord.”

PRAYER

Lord, help us not just to light candles in worship but also to be candles lit by the Holy Spirit, spreading, wherever we go, the warmth of Your love and the light of Your Truth. Amen.