***The Paschal Candle***

Now that we have celebrated the Solemnity of Easter we see again the prominent visibility of the Paschal Candle. Is this just another candle? What does it all mean?

Some people say they are spiritual and don’t require objects of religion to believe. I understand. I am like that in some ways. Then one day I began reading the writings of an author who focused on the symbols associated with the objects. For example, take our country’s flag. As an object it can be just a piece of cloth but what does it stand for as a symbol? It stands for freedom and justice. It represents liberty and love of country. Its power goes way beyond a piece of cloth. Symbols are a place-holder for the real thing. We can’t hold freedom or liberty in the palm of our hand but the flag sparks those emotions in our minds and hearts. We learn to cherish the flag because of all the good it represents. We fly it proudly and visibly. So it is with our religious symbols.

Just a word of caution here. Our religious symbols are symbols but they are not the real thing they represent. For example, we love Mary, the mother of God, but we should not love her statue. We should respect it, cherish it and locate it in a place of honor. The status is not Mary but rather an instrument that helps humans to connect with the spiritual.

In contrast, the Eucharist is not a religious symbol. This is the real Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the appearance of bread and wine. The Eucharist is a miracle. It is the Real Thing!

**What is the Paschal Candle?**That’s the large candle on the large stand we see at Mass. The Paschal Candle is a symbol of Christ risen from the dead. The light of the candle represents Christ, the Light of the World. The fire represents Christ’s resurrection. The slow burning nature of the candle represents Christ’s endless love. The prominence of the candle represents Christ’s visible and powerful presence still alive and working in our community and in the world.

This candle is quite special and is one of the most important symbols of our faith. It is three feet tall and around three inches thick. It is made of beeswax. The pure beeswax represents the sinless nature of Jesus formed in Mary’s womb. The large size of the candle allows it to last all year and still be standing tall until next Easter.

A new Paschal Candle is brought into service every year at the Easter Vigil. It remains in the sanctuary or near the ambo for the Easter season. It is customary for the candle to burn for all Masses during the full fifty days of the Easter Season. After Pentecost it is kept near the Baptismal Font and used during baptisms, funerals and other services.

During funerals it reminds us of our Baptism. It guides us from birth to death and points to the promised new life in Christ. In the US Bishops document, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*, 94, it describes the candle as a symbol of the light of Christ, rising in glory, scattering the darkness of our hearts and minds. The Paschal Candle is placed near the coffin as a sign of the Christian's passover from death to life.

After the Service of Fire at the Easter Vigil, the Paschal Candle is lit from the fire and carried into the church. Its flame is passed along to the people holding candles as a visual symbol of the Light of Christ and the victory of the resurrection being shared with each of us. The call and response, “The Light of Christ. Thanks be to God.” Is proclaimed three times in procession. Then a special hymn of praise is sung called The Exsultet. It poetically describes the dignity and majesty of the Easter mystery. It tells the story of humanity’s sinfulness and God’s redemptive love and mercy. Part of the Exsultet describes the Paschal Candle as a pillar of fire that glows to the honor of God, mingling with the lights of heaven and forever burning.

“On this, your night of grace, O holy Father, accept this candle, a solemn offering, the work of bees and of your servants’ hands, an evening sacrifice of praise, this gift from your most holy Church.

But now we know the praises of this pillar, a flame divided but undimmed, which glowing fire ignites for God’s honor, a fire into many flames divided, yet never dimmed by sharing of its light, for it is fed by melting wax, drawn out by mother bees to build a torch so precious.” (The Roman Missal, 3rd Edition, 2011)

**What is on the Paschal Candle?**There are many artistic designs available for Paschal Candles but all of them have much in common.

There is an image of the Cross on the candle. The Cross is itself a symbol of our faith in Jesus and his triumph over death. Through the Cross of Christ we are saved.

Because a new candle is obtained each year, you will see on the candle the year in which the candle was placed into service. The new candle first appears during the Service of Light at the Easter Vigil. Some candles have the digits for the current year placed around the cross near the center corners. Others have the four digits of the year placed below the cross. The new candle and the new year inscribed on it symbolizes Christ’s presence in our current community.

The Greek letters Alpha and Omega are engraved on the candle. These are the first and last letter of the Greek Alphabet. They signify the beginning and the end. This symbolizes God’s eternal nature. During the Easter Vigil when the Paschal Candle is blessed, the following prayer accompanies the blessing:

“Christ yesterday and today; the Beginning and the End; the Alpha and Omega. All time belongs to him; and all ages. To him be glory and power; through every age and for ever. Amen.” (The Roman Missal, 3rd Edition, 2011)

Five grains of incense are arranged at the four extremes of the cross and another in the center. They symbolize the wounds of Jesus – his head crowned with thorns, his hands, feet and his pierced side.

If you have never closely examined the Paschal Candle, I recommend at some future time you explore it up close and discover the beauty and richness of the symbols. You can also search for articles and images of the Paschal Candle on the internet in the comfort of your home.

The Paschal Candle represents the faith, hope and eternal life promised to all of us and fulfilled by Christ’s death and resurrection! The Paschal Candle IS the Light of Christ.

I hope I have given you a little insight to the power of the symbols of our faith.

Christ is risen. Alleluia, alleluia!

Rick Swenton, Cantor, St. Pius the Tenth Church