***So…How Many Candles Go on an Altar? Why Two or Four or Six?***

One of the great blessings of being a Bishop is that I am able to be in a different church almost every Sunday. It is rare for a Bishop to be a Rector or Vicar of a parish or mission, but for any number of reasons it is not quite as uncommon today as it used to be. I would suggest that with the life expectancy of human beings today, that generally means that bishops live a bit longer now. Also, and now that we have in the past few centuries allowed for the “retirement” of bishops, we see more bishops available to assist in any number of ways. Partly what this means for me is that I have been a bishop for almost thirty years and a priest for almost fifty years, and have seen quite a few “variations on the norm.” I can report that every church does “it” the right way, but that no two churches do “it” the same way.

To review the use of candles in the Sanctuary we need a few basic definitions and principles. First of all, the “Sanctuary” refers to what is behind the Altar Rail, and is different from the Chancel and the Nave (and Transepts.) I state this because the type of candles used outside the Sanctuary may well be different in composition and placement. When I say “Altar” I will try to distinguish between an Altar where the Celebrant faces Liturgical East versus a “free standing” Altar where the celebrant faces Liturgical West.

To begin, nothing artificial has generally been permitted in the Sanctuary: artificial flowers, polyester vestments and hangings and linens and candles that are less than 51% natural have not been permitted, traditionally. Polyester is not natural by itself, nor is paraffin. Carpeting and flooring that are not at least 51% “natural” are traditionally not permitted on the floor. As a side note, the steps at the Altar are much larger than the steps in houses, because the Sacred Ministers must be able, comfortably, to stand on them facing East but also when they make a sharp turn to move to the Right or to the Left (the ceremonial at Solemn High Mass.)

This article deals with candles, but as an aside, always read the labels and the fine print before buying anything for use in the Sanctuary. Remember the measure is that it must be 51% “natural.” There are even “canonical” measurements for the height of an Altar and the size of the steps, for a very good reason. In another article I will explain why and also how easy it is today to have future problems when those who are not trained in liturgical architecture are the decision makers. In all honesty, having served as a consultant in about five different dioceses, I have had to sit in on some creative (and unnecessary) meetings with conflict, simply because people did not have advance information.

We need to realize that much of what we have and what we do in our Sanctuaries, as it relates to candles, has a functional reason and a symbolic reason. The functional is very clear. Walk into your church and do not turn on any lights, and think about what you see. Frankly for most of us the only thing we see in the Sanctuary is a solitary light — usually “white” or “clear” that shows us a single candle — usually 51% beeswax or olive oil (not cooking oil!). This Sanctuary Candle tells us that nearby is the Blessed Sacrament, either in a Tabernacle (on or immediately behind the “Mensa” (Altar top) or on a small table behind the Altar. Remember that traditional Altars are not actually attached to the wall, even though from the nave it appears that they are. Or there may be an Aumbry which is in the Sanctuary but not on or immediately behind the Altar. This candle is lighted at all times except on the rare occasion (such as the Triduum) when the Blessed Sacrament is not there. Obviously, the Sanctuary Candle does not give us enough light to see.

Now let’s visualize where the Clergy are in the Sanctuary and consider where light is needed: The Altar, where the Clergy sit, where the Lessons and Gospel are read, where people need to see where they are walking to get into the Sanctuary. The most historic formula is: one Altar, one main chair and one main place to read the Lessons: Altar, Cathedra (Bishop’s chair in his cathedral) or (Throne in a non-Cathedral) or (Celebrant’s - “presidential - presider’s chair.) The Ambo is a type of combined pulpit and lectern and a later usage is to have one for the Lessons (for the Daily Office) and one - pulpit - for the Gospel and/or the Sermon/homily. Of more recent usage historically is to use the Lectern for the Lessons at Mass (not the Gospel). It is becoming increasingly common now in the age of amplification to see a Lectern used for a host of reasons because there is a microphone there. Let’s look again: needed candles at the Altar to see the Missal (Altar Book) and the Oblations (bread and wine), at the Chair (to see some of the prayers - especially at the Bishop’s chair), at the place(s) where the Lessons and Gospel are read, and a type of flashlight when walking to the Altar at the beginning - the center of the Nave if that’s where the Gospel is read - and at the end when the Deacon dismisses us. As we can see, that is the functional and practical, and what I have written is also a dramatic attempt on my part to summarize centuries of practical usages for you. I have failed to mention the Paschal Candle because I do not wish to debate the day it is extinguished and whether or not it should be extinguished during the 40 or 50 days! Another time!

Now let’s look at an Altar. In spite of certain current usages now where priests face East but only stand in the center of the Altar, the two candles at a Low Mass are at the ends of the Mensa or on the little table (sometimes called a “retable”) where the Tabernacle may be. (In another article I will explain more about that small “table” and its other names.). The Candle on the right (called the Epistle side since we read the Epistle from that side) gives us the light we need to read and pray using the Altar Missal for the first part of the Mass. It is also there that we bless a variety of objects and “sacramentals.” That is why the book is always squared with the Altar corners instead of inclined as it will be when it is moved to the Gospel side, the priest stands in front of the Missal to do the various blessings unrelated to the Words of Institution when he stands in the canter of the Altar later in the Mass. Once it is time for the Gospel to be read, the book is moved to the extreme end of the Altar on the left (called the Gospel side - where the Gospel is read) as it is read inclined towards the North (long reason…which I will explain in another article.). Obviously, a candle is needed to see the Gospel print. Soon afterwards the Missal is then moved towards the center, but still inclined towards the North so that when the priest is at the center of the Altar, he will be able to see.

Now for the question you have been asking - the mysterious seventh candle when a bishop is present! For most “High Masses” there are six tall candles on the Mensa or retable that are only lighted at a High Mass. Consider this: at Low Mass only one priest needs to see. At High Mass we need lights for the Celebrant, the Deacon, the Subdeacon and the Master of Ceremonies. But we know that six is an incomplete and thus “not holy” number. So when the Bishop is present, he completes the incomplete. The tricky question is where to put the seventh candle. Generally speaking, in an age before diagnosing presbyopia, the bishop was the oldest of the clergy - older than the priests and the deacons - and he needed more light. Some cathedrals have a special candle stand built into the Altar (and even sometimes the tabernacle) where the seventh candle is/was placed when the Bishop is present. There have been numerous usages…but the most common one is the use of the Bugia (the usual term). This is a portable candle with a long handle and it usually accompanies the Bishop in procession, at his chair when he Confirms, and at the Altar next to the Missal. The functional is clear — now he can see! The symbolic is also clear — now we have seven candles.

Finally, people have asked why it is that when a Bishop celebrates Low Mass there are four candles at the Altar, but when a Priest celebrates a Low Mass, there are two. When I am at a Cathedral to celebrate Low Mass there are four matching candles...and everyone knows that the Bishop is celebrating that day. If the Bishop is not the celebrant, then two candles are removed at the Low Mass. (I have made some Altar Guilds a bit nervous over the years when I showed up to celebrate the Low Mass and then they went scrambling for candles three and four!)

In the end, there are numerous “traditions” and “customs” but the ones that can haunt us are the ones that are based on “That’s what we did at St. Swithin’s” or “But Father Jones didn’t do it that way!” Capital “T” Tradition is really what counts but sometimes people make small “t” tradition into a capital “T,” and they elevate “custom” to a capital “T.” It is always best to read and learn in advance. Even during a more recent period of liturgical “renewal” we have seen perfectly good practices eliminated, with people wanting to reintroduce what was discarded, but had never seen how the practice had been done before — often by seeing pictures or attending a conference. Everyone seems to have their favorite book that could be entitled, “The Right Way to do Liturgy” written by “Dr. I. B. Wright!” In truth with the number of practices throughout Christendom, the introduction of kerosene lamps and then electricity, new possibilities now exist, and most of us need to do more research. But my word of caution is: don’t simply copy what you have seen elsewhere, and don’t allow people untrained in Liturgy and Church Architecture to make critical decisions about the Sanctuary (or Chancel and Nave) and buy items as memorials, for example, that are not consistent with a definable tradition. More hard feelings have been caused by conflicts regarding “holy items” than over a conflict regarding some matters of Theology. Prayerfully and diplomatically teaching Tradition, traditions, and customs can go a long way in focusing on Whose House it really is and Whose Presence is on the Altar. All of what we do at the Altar is to be directed towards Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest who is the only one to have offered a Perfect Sacrifice.