

The Paschal Candle: Its Principal Features and Their Spiritual Significance

INTRODUCTION

The term

During the blessed Eastertide more and more of those Lutheran churches which have not altogether capitulated to the iconoclastic barrenness of the Protestant sects are following the ancient and laudable custom of featuring what is known as The Paschal Candle (“Paschal”, pronounced pass-kul, is another word for “Easter”).

The object referred to

Fittingly blessed during the solemnities of Holy Saturday, this candle, for the greatest part made of beeswax, is exposed to view on the Gospel side of the altar (the left side, facing it) until Ascension Thursday. During that time it is lighted for public worship (except during requiem services for the dead and devotions conducted with violet vestments and paraments), and is extinguished after The Gospel on the day which commemorates Our Lord’s return to Heaven.

The candle is richly ornamented with Christian symbolism, sometimes in striking color. Its most significant embellishment consists of five cavities in the form of a cross near its base, wherein are placed five grains of incense during its consecration each year.

The candle stands exposed on a special pedestal, usually richly carved and often of imposing size: candle and stand in some European churches reach a height of forty feet.

The Paschal Candle constitutes an inspiring gift which a parishioner might well present to his congregation in memory of someone already asleep with The Sign of Faith.

Its nature

Uninformed Lutherans, upon seeing or hearing about this object, naturally ask: “What is it? What is the idea behind it? What is the value of The Paschal Candle?”

Those questions can be answered in very simple terms. The Paschal Candle is a symbol: it is a tangible object with a spiritual meaning. And anyone who knows the meaning behind that object is reminded at a glance of what it would take a whole volume of words to say.

The precedent behind it

Before going into this matter of The Paschal Candle more thoroughly, let it be said that The Christian Church has always emphasized the use of symbolism. She has never ever relied exclusively upon the spoken word to drive home her message.

In an age which lays so much stress upon visual education, it should be realized that The Church has been centuries ahead of our time, for ever since her formation 2000 years ago she has used the medium of the eye to impress her holy doctrines upon man's mind and heart, as much as the medium of the ear.

The colors with which she adorns her altars, the vestments with which she clothes her ministers, the art with which she embellishes her windows, the objects with which she enriches her walls: these things are not primarily meant to be decorative, though they may happen to be so; they are principally meant to be instructive.

And he who knows what they signify and symbolize comes into a church which features them to find himself surrounded on all sides by a host of silent sermons, preached to him in silk and glass and wood and stone, even though the pulpit be unoccupied.

The Sacraments a case in point

No doubt The Church emphasizes symbolism in imitation of Our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The two Major Sacraments which He instituted while He lived here on earth, besides being means of grace, are material signs which correspond to the spiritual blessings conveyed by them.

Holy Baptism

Christ chose water as the element to be used in Holy Baptism because that is the ordinary substance a person uses many times a day in order to make himself clean; and when used in Baptism, he is reminded of the fact: just as ordinary water washes away the filth of the body, so The Water of Regeneration washes away the filth of the soul.

Holy Eucharist

For the very same reason Christ chose bread and wine for the celebration of The Blessed Sacrament. These things resemble Our Saviour's body and blood. So much so, that some erring denominations within The Christian Church maintain that they represent Our Lord's body and blood and nothing more! Lutherans, who have been taught the correct doctrine of The Lord's Supper, know that they do more than that; they know that this bread and wine are substances by which the very body and blood of Christ are conveyed to them. But at the same time, they should realize likewise that Our Lord chose these particular substances because they also symbolize the invisible elements received in them and with them and under them.

In the light of these facts it is not surprising to find that the art of symbolism, once cultivated by Christ, has been encouraged by His Church ever since.

The discussion at hand

The Paschal Candle, then, belongs to the field of Christian Symbolism. It is one of the oldest and most instructive symbols possessed by The Church Catholic.

And therefore it is well for every Christian to be acquainted with its principal features and what they mean.

I. WHY IT IS A CANDLE

In the first place, The Paschal Candle is a candle. In other words, it is a light.

With reference to Christ

Now, this being the case, a person would be uninformed indeed who did not realize that it represents Christ, in whose honor Easter is commemorated.

It was He who gave mankind this message, which all the centuries since have substantiated without contradiction (Jn 8:12): "I am The LIGHT of The World! He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the LIGHT of life!"

And in the face of that declaration Lutherans join The Universal Church in confessing the words of The Nicene Creed: "I believe in * one Lord Jesus Christ; The only-begotten Son of God; begotten of The Father before all worlds; God of God; LIGHT OF LIGHT; Very God of Very God."

With reference to The Christian

But Jesus did not only say of Himself: "I am The Light of The World!"; He also said to His followers (Mt 5:14-16): "YE are the light of the world! A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid; neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel (basket), but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven!"

So The Paschal Candle is a sign of what CHRIST is like—and of what YOU should be like if you wish to measure up to the ideal for which God put you on this earth. Christianity is more than attendance at Easter Services. That is glorifying God; but that is not enough. Christianity is a CONSTANT living to the glory of God, out of gratitude to Him who gave up His life in order that man, by God's grace, might one day sun himself in the light of Heaven.

II. WHY IT HAS A DEFINITE LOCATION

Notice, in the second place, where The Paschal Candle is located; it properly stands on the Gospel side of the altar. And that has significance also.

Facing the altar, its right hand side is known as the Epistle side, while its left hand side is known as the Gospel side.

In churches where things are done decently and in order, everything that is REQUIRED of man is read from the EPISTLE side of the altar. And when he hears what these things are, his hearts is TROUBLED, because the demands of God call for nothing less than perfection. On the other hand, everything that God has DONE for man is properly proclaimed from the GOSPEL side. And that fills his soul with genuine, unutterable JOY.

With reference to Christ

So remember that Christ, your Saviour, represented by The Paschal Candle on the Gospel side of the altar, is your surpassing JOY!

The message which the angels proclaimed at His birth is still true: (Lk 2:10): “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great JOY!” The words of Jesus to His Disciples just before His death are just as applicable to you and all Christians living today (Jn 16:22): “Ye now * have sorrow. But I will see you again, and your heart shall REJOICE, and your JOY no man taketh from you.”

Christ is The LIGHT of The World; He is also The JOY of the World.

With reference to The Christian

And so it should also be with you, if you are a Christian. Your happiness ought not be some weak, SPASMATIC thing that comes to the surface only, say, at Eastertime. It ought to be a PERMANENT blessing, permeating every moment of your life. What you have in Christ Jesus is something that can counterbalance the very worst that life can do to you. You must weep at times, of course, because you are human enough to be human; but never forget that you possess an alchemy by which you can transform every salty tear into a sparkling diamond, knowing as you do that all things work together for good to them that love God (see Rom 8:28).

III. WHY IT IS MADE OF BEESWAX

In the third place, The Paschal Candle is made of beeswax. There is reason for this fact: of all substances used in the production of candles, The Christian Church has always regarded beeswax as the purest.

With reference to Christ

Therefore the element out of which The Paschal Candle is made symbolizes the sinlessness of Jesus Christ.

He was indeed The Sinless One. The story of His Passion reveals how Our Saviour's enemies, from Judas who betrayed Him through Pilate who condemned Him to The Centurion who crucified Him, without exception pronounced Him righteous. And that to which they testified, with that The Scriptures agree from beginning to end.

How could it be otherwise! Jesus being none other than THE SON OF GOD, immaculately conceived, divinely commissioned, innocently killed, how could it be otherwise! It is not an ordinary human being whom The Church honors with her Easter solemnities; it is the infinitely holy GOD Himself, manifest in the flesh (see I Tim 3:16), who came that we might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly (see Jn 10:10)!

With reference to the Christian

But just as surely is the beeswax in The Paschal Candle a symbol of our own sinlessness in the eyes of our Creator.

Unless this is true, all The Church's Easter celebrations are mere extravagances. Unless Christ became sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the RIGHTEOUSNESS of God in Him (see II Cor 5:21), Easter might just as well be eliminated.

But it never will be eliminated! It will never be eliminated because the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin (see I Jn 1:7); and The Communion of Saints will continue, by God's grace, to extol that precious blood

"Till all the ransom'd Church of God
Be saved to sin no more."

IV. WHY IT IS LIGHTED

In the fourth place, during the period in which it is exposed, the Paschal Candle is lighted for public worship.

With reference to Christ

That is The Church's dramatic way of reminding The Faithful that Christ is risen again from the dead.

On Good Friday the light of His life is extinguished; Holy Mother Church holds a dead Jesus in her arms and nothing more.

But on Easter He stands before the eyes of the world as The Conqueror of sin, Satan, and the shroud, and promises His followers (Jn 14:19) "Because I live, ye shall live also!"

With reference to the Christian

By virtue of that short but profoundly important sentence, a Christian sees in the flame of The Paschal Candle a promise of his own resurrection. Now he knows: the cemetery is not the end. It may hold him for awhile, and break the hearts of his loved ones while it holds him; but in the end the grave will have to relinquish the dead within its grasp, in order that those who lived FOR Christ and died IN Christ may reign WITH Christ forevermore.

Every Easter is a CELEBRATION of Christ's resurrection from the dead; but it is more than that. It is also an ANTICIPATION of The Christians' own resurrection, by virtue of which they can cry out even now (I Cor 15:55, 57): "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? * Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ!"

V. WHY IT IS RICHLY EMBELLISHED

In the fifth place, The Paschal Candle is highly ornamented from top to bottom. Even the five small cavities in it, which represent the five sacred wounds of Our Blessed Lord, are filled with pieces of sweet-smelling incense.

With reference to Christ

All this adornment, of course, is meant to symbolize the fact that, when He rose from the dead, Christ left the grave with a body that was glorified—the same body which He had here on earth, and yet a body altogether different: no longer subject to time and space, no longer exposed to pain and hunger and thirst and weariness, no longer prone to the weaknesses of this mortal life, but from now on a body whose nature was in fullest harmony with the nature of Heaven.

With reference to the Christian

A body, in fact, like the body with which The Christian shall be clothed when he steps forth out of his own grave. This we believe about all who died with The Sign of Faith: the body "is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly, the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall CHANGE our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body" (see I Cor 15:43, 49; Phil 3: 21).

VI. WHY IT IS SET IN A DIGNIFIED HOLDER

In the sixth place, the dignity of The Paschal Candle makes an impression upon all who see it, held aloft as it is on a pedestal elaborately carved and beautifully decorated, towering above those who kneel in humility and reverence before the altar of their God when they receive His sacred body and precious blood in The Holy Eucharist.

With reference to Christ

Herein can be seen the exaltation of Our Blessed Lord.

Now that He is risen from the dead, He is no longer as a mere man among men, walking the hills and plains of Palestine, with no place to lay His head (see Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58), “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Is 53:3). Now He is “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (I Tim 6:15; Rev. 19:16), exalted “far above all principalities and power and might and dominion” (Eph 1:21), claiming the heavens for His throne and the earth for His footstool, blessed with “a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in Heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God The Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

The Christian Church does not worship A DEAD JEW who died 2000 years ago; she worships A RESURRECTED GOD who lives forevermore—holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of His glory!

With reference to the Christian

Also in this respect The Paschal Candle is a symbol of Christ’s followers.

However humble they may be in the eyes of men, in God’s eyes they are KINGS AND PRIESTS, serving their Lord in priestly service now, and destined to reign with Him forevermore hereafter. It is almost too stupendous to believe, but The Bible says (see I Cor 6:3) that someday they are going to judge the angels!

Who can believe that without seeing his dignity as Heaven sees it! Yes, “we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us” (Rom 8:37)!

VII. WHY IT IS EVENTUALLY REMOVED

In the seventh and last place, The Paschal Candle is a symbol of the ascension. It remains in church for forth days: from Easter Day, when The Church celebrates Christ’s resurrection from the dead, to Ascension Day, when she commemorates His return to Heaven. This it is extinguished and removed.

With reference to Christ

Thus during that period of time The Faithful have a vivid reminder constantly before them that, after leaving His grave, Christ was visible to His Disciples on sundry occasions for a certain length of time, and then He removed His visible presence from them.

With reference to the Christian

Even as it will someday be with The Christian. Unless Christ returns to judge the quick and the dead in the next few years or so, death is eventually going to take the visible presence away from this world of each one of us.

But that bothers us none. Death is nothing gruesome to us Christians. To us it's a going home, a folding of the tent and a stealing away to God. For us it is an ascension into Heaven.

CONCLUSION

That, in a few words, comprises the principal features of The Paschal Candle and their spiritual significance.

As inspiring and instructive as The Paschal Candle is, it is, after all, only a symbol, only a reminder. And someday symbols and reminders in The Christian Religion will no longer be necessary. That is when we shall see Christ face to face, we who at present walk by faith and not by sight (see II Cor 5:7).

Shall we? Shall we someday see Him face to face? Shall we someday reach that Land where we shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, where the sun shall not light on us, nor any heat, where The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed us, and lead us unto living fountains of waters, and where God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes (see Rev 7:16, 17)?

Unless He deliberately lied when He said: "In My Father's House are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am, there ye may be also" (Jn 14:2, 3)!

"Amen, Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20)!