THE MEANING BEHIND PLACING TWO, FOUR, SIX, OR SEVEN CANDLES IN THE SANCTUARY OR ON THE ALTAR?

A young altar server was preparing the sanctuary before the service. One Sunday, he placed two candles on the altar. The following Sunday, there were six candles. Then, when the bishop visited, there were seven candles. He became confused and asked the sexton, "Why does the number of altar candles keep changing?" The sexton replied, "Because the number of candles tells us something about the importance of the celebration."

But is it really as simple as counting the number of candles?

Different Anglican provinces, dioceses and parishes have different customs. The number of candles may indicate the liturgical rank or solemnity of a celebration, the presence of a bishop, local custom, or particular ceremonial practice. Some may assume that the number of candles is simply a matter of decoration, or even a legacy handed down by earlier church leaders.

While biblical symbolism may provide a theological interpretation—particularly the imagery of the seven lamps in Revelation—the practice itself should not be reduced to biblical numerology. Candles function primarily within the grammar of worship. They mark the solemnity of the celebration, honour the altar, and visibly express the Church's reverence for Christ and his presence. Thus, the number of candles should be understood first as a matter of liturgical custom and ecclesial order, and only secondarily as a symbolic reference.

Do More Candles Mean More Important Worship?

This raises an important question: could the practice unintentionally teach that "more candles mean more important worship"?

The Eucharist is not made more holy by having six candles rather than two. The number communicates something symbolically or ceremonially, but it does not determine the spiritual importance of the Eucharist. Whether celebrated on an ordinary weekday or on the greatest feast of the Christian year, the Eucharist remains the same gift of Christ's grace to his Church.

The Meaning of Light

Since the early centuries of Christianity, lamps and lights have been used in worship and devotion. In places where natural light was limited, including underground burial sites and other enclosed spaces, they served an obvious practical purpose. Yet light gradually acquired a deeper theological meaning, expressing Christ as "the light of the world" (John 8:12).

Thus, the use of lights in Christian worship developed from practical necessity into a visible sign of Christ's presence, the Gospel, and the hope of resurrection.

In liturgical Christian traditions—including Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism and Lutheranism—the use of candles is therefore rarely without meaning. Although some worshippers may regard them simply as church decoration, candles can indicate the sacred character of worship, illuminate liturgical actions, and express established ceremonial customs. Their number and placement may be shaped by theological symbolism, inherited tradition, local practice, and the character or solemnity of a particular celebration.

Candles in Anglican Worship

Within Anglicanism, this wider Christian symbolism was received and developed in a distinctive historical setting. Anglican sources have described lighted candles as signs of "the light of Christ" or "the light of the gospel," and as reminders that the time and place of worship are sacred.

This symbolism predates the English Reformation. However, Anglican practice concerning candles was subsequently shaped by the Reformation, the Prayer Book tradition, and

the continuing development of Anglican ceremonial practice.

Anglican worship provides a framework for understanding the continuing use of candles. At Easter, light emerging from darkness visibly proclaims Christ's resurrection. In Evensong, light can accompany the Church's prayer at the close of the day. Over time, Anglican churches developed different customs concerning the number, placement and use of candles. These customs were influenced not only by Prayer Book tradition, but also by local ceremonial practice, churchmanship and later liturgical renewal.

What About the Number of Candles?

The question then becomes: what does the number of candles communicate?

In the 1547 Royal Injunctions of Edward VI, which preceded the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, provision was made for "only two lights upon the high altar before the sacrament." This is an important early reference in the history of Anglican candle practice.

However, the development of Anglican ceremonial practice after the Reformation means that the use of two, four, six or seven candles should not be understood as one universal Anglican rule. Different traditions developed different customs.

1. Two candles — the ordinary Eucharist

In many Anglican churches, two candles are used for the Holy Eucharist as the normal ceremonial practice. They can remind us that Christ is the Light of the World and that every Eucharistic celebration is a sacred act of worship, whether celebrated on a weekday or a major feast.

2. Four candles — Greater Solemnity

In some Anglican ceremonial traditions, four candles may be used on occasions of greater solemnity. This may include particular sung or festive services, special thanksgiving celebrations, Requiem services, or other occasions designated by local custom. Where the bishop is present for an ordinary service, some churches may also use additional candles as a sign of episcopal presence.

3. Six candles — Sundays and solemn celebrations

In some traditions, six candles are placed around or upon the altar for Sundays, major feast days and other solemn celebrations. The greater number visually expresses the festal character and dignity of the occasion. Again, this should be understood as a ceremonial custom rather than a universal Anglican requirement.

4. Seven candles — when the bishop celebrates

In some Anglican traditions, seven candles are used when the bishop celebrates the Holy Eucharist. This ancient ceremonial symbolism is sometimes associated with the fullness of the bishop's office as chief shepherd and teacher of the people of God.

It is not because the bishop is more important than Christ. Rather, the candles signify the bishop's particular ministry of oversight and his role as Christ's visible shepherd within the diocese.

A Visual Language of Worship

The changing number of altar candles, therefore, should not be understood as a simple scale by which one service is judged to be more sacred than another. Rather, candles function as part of the Church's visual language.

They may express the presence of Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel, the festal character of the celebration, the dignity of a principal feast, or the presence of a bishop. Yet the precise form this language takes differs across Anglican provinces, dioceses and parishes.

Some may have noticed that in Anglican churches two candles are the normal custom for the Eucharist. In others, four or six may be used on greater feasts, while seven may be used when the bishop celebrates. Seven candles are also traditionally associated in some cathedral practice with the bishop's presence, particularly where the bishop's cathedra is situated.

Such practices arise from ceremonial tradition, local custom and particular understandings of liturgical order. The number of candles may indeed communicate something about the character or ceremonial solemnity of a service, but it does not measure the value of worship or the holiness of the Eucharist. Christ is present in the sacramental life of the Church, and

the Eucharist remains the same gift of grace for all.

Light in the Local Culture

It is noteworthy that, in contemporary Anglican worship, many dioceses and congregations have developed more indigenous forms for expressing the Christian symbol of light. In some congregations, traditional candles have been complemented or replaced by the *kuttu vilakku*, a traditional oil lamp often placed on a silver stand, or by other locally meaningful forms of illumination.

These practices do not diminish the theological or liturgical value of light. On the contrary, they can add depth to worship by allowing the local congregation to express its faith through symbols rooted in its own cultural memory and communal experience.

The use of the *kuttu vilakku*, for example, may evoke ideas of welcome, reverence, hospitality and the continuity of life within the community. When the lamp is lit during worship, it can signify Christ as the Light of the World, the presence of God among his people, and the Church's vocation to bear light into the world.

Anglican Worship and Indigenous Expression

In this way, the lamp becomes more than a decorative object. It serves as a bridge between the Christian message and the cultural world of the worshipping community.

Such adaptations demonstrate that Anglican worship need not be culturally uniform in order to remain authentically Anglican. The use of indigenous forms enables the liturgy to speak in the language of the people—not only through words, but also through gesture, material objects, colour, movement and light.
The congregation is therefore not merely receiving a pattern of worship inherited from elsewhere; it is actively offering its own cultural identity to God.

Indigenous forms of illumination can thus be understood as an act of theological participation, in which local communities embody the universal Christian faith through the symbols, artistic traditions and social practices familiar to them.

What Do the Candles Help Us See?

For this reason, the question is not simply **how many candles or oil lamps we use**, but rather: **what do these candles help the Church to see and proclaim?**

When used thoughtfully, they direct our attention beyond themselves—to Christ, who illumines the worshipping community and gathers his people around his table.

The number of candles may change. The customs may differ. The cultural expressions may vary. But the purpose remains the same: **to point us beyond the candle to Christ, the Light of the World.**

Written by Bishop Charles Samuel

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