

## 7. SACRAMENTALS



### Engaging all our senses

Catholics use material things as “gateways” to the sacred - water, oils, candles, incense, ash on Ash Wednesday, crucifixes, stained-glass windows, icons, statues and religious art. These are called “sacramentals”.



There is a difference between Catholic and Protestant worship. It is probably fair to say that for Protestants worship is primarily a matter of mind and speech. Protestants will tend to regard the senses as potential sources of distraction during worship – hence, for example, the lack of ornamentation in Protestant churches.

Catholic liturgy, however, speaks to us through all our senses, not only words. We encounter

God in many more ways than just our intellect. The Orthodox are fond of saying that worship should be a foretaste of heaven.

For Catholics, worship, especially the Eucharist, is an action – something *done*, not simply said – so the body and the senses are also involved. The body is involved through bowing, genuflecting, processing, liturgical dancing and making the Sign of the Cross. We see statues and candles and the vestments of the priest, we smell the incense, we hear the music, we feel the rosary beads in our hands and the holy water on our foreheads, we taste the Blood of Christ in the chalice. These gestures and objects are known as “sacramentals”.



### Sacraments and sacramentals

The Catholic Church believes that the sacraments (baptism, the Eucharist, marriage, confirmation, etc) were in essence instituted by Jesus Christ; whereas the sacramentals were instituted by the Church. Sacramentals are thus not essential, but are external aids to involve us in worship.

The value of sacramentals lies not in the objects or the gestures themselves, but in what they signify and in the devotion and love of God that they awaken in the believer. These sacred traditions help to bridge the divide between our meagre comprehension and what lies beyond.

There is no magic or superstition involved! An ignorant and superstitious person would say, “If I sprinkle holy water here, say these prayers and cross myself, I will make God do this for me.” The person using a sacramental properly would say, “I want to be closer to God, to be constantly reminded of His love, protection, forgiveness and mercy. So I will make the Sign of the Cross with holy water to remind myself of my baptismal call. I will pray the Angelus at noon to remind myself of what God did for us in the Incarnation.”

### Holy Water

Holy water is placed at the entrances of Catholic churches so that people can make the Sign of the Cross with the water, thus reminding themselves that they are baptised and redeemed by Christ.



They do so on entering the church to dispose themselves to prayer and on leaving the church to remind themselves to take the life of Christ into the world.

Holy water is ordinary tap water (usually with a little salt added as a preservative) which has been blessed by a priest. Blessing the water simply means that God is asked to use it as a vehicle for his grace. God is thanked for the gift of water and it is set aside for sacred use.

# Candles



Candles are placed on the altar at Mass. They remind us of the light of Christ. Jesus is “the light of the world” (John 8:12). His mission is to enlighten “them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79).

Light penetrates darkness; it nourishes life; it illumines all around it. Therefore it is a fitting symbol of God, the Source of all grace and enlightenment. “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

## The Paschal Candle

*The Paschal Candle is a special candle used during the Easter Season to represent the risen Christ. During the Easter Vigil ceremony, this candle is lit from a new fire and carried into the darkened church. The darkness represents the world without God, and the candle is the light of God returning because of Christ’s resurrection.*



## Votive candles

In many Catholic churches there are altars of the Sacred Heart or Our Lady before which people light “votive” candles.

“Votive” is from the Latin *votum*, a vow or a wish.

Slow-burning votive candles express a wish or desire, such as recovery of health, thus combining an action with the prayer; a token, that as we leave the church we desire something of ourselves to remain in prayer. The burning candle gives warmth, light and is a “living flame” – all of these symbolise what we desire for ourselves and for others; to have the warmth of God's love in our lives, to be guided by the light of faith and to become living flames ourselves witnessing to God in the world.





## Incense

Incense is a visual representation of prayer rising to God. It is a sweet-smelling offering, like the offering of a good life, to the Lord.

Incense has Old Testament origins. In Exodus 25:6 incense is included among the offerings that God seeks from the children of Israel, and in Exodus 30 God gives Moses detailed instructions for the altar of incense.

In the Book of Revelation, there is a direct connection between incense and prayer:

*“Then another angel having a golden censer came in and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar that was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand” (Revelation 8 3-4).*

## Why are there statues in Catholic churches?

Some Protestants are not very happy about statues in Catholic churches. They think there is a danger of confusing the image with the reality. They also have in mind the commandment forbidding the worshipping of idols (Exodus 20: 4-5).

For Catholics, statues and pictures serve as a focal point for devotion and prayer. Just as people have photographs which they treasure because the photographs represent and bring to mind people they love and are devoted to, so all that statues and pictures do is represent the one depicted.

While statues may serve as reminders of sacred persons, they obviously have no power in themselves. To believe that a piece of plaster or wood has any power – no matter what it depicts – would be the most absurd superstition. Catholics (unless they are very stupid!) do not worship statues and pictures.

*Statues and pictures bring to mind the saints and the events connected with their lives, to inspire us and turn our minds to prayer and reflection. Icons (more common in Orthodox churches than Catholic churches) are paintings that try to draw us into the mystery of the spiritual world.*



The Church encourages us to remember that the Christian community is made up not only of those living now but also those who have gone before us. So we look to the saints as guides and examples of how to live a Christian life. Statues and pictures help us to remember them, and in remembering them, we are in communion with those who, just like us, have struggled to be faithful to God.



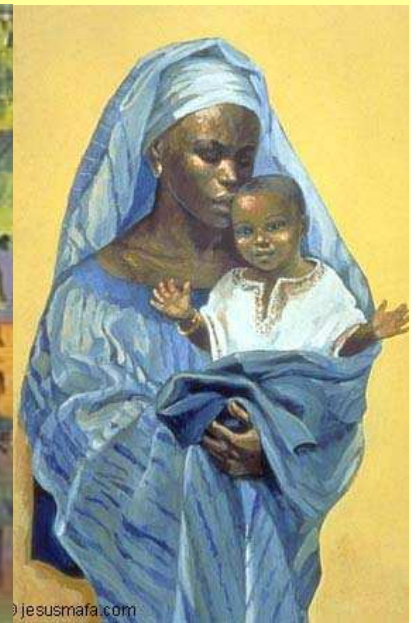
Visual representations of Jesus affect how people see and understand Jesus. Many statues and pictures in Catholic churches were imported from Europe and are from a time when spirituality was very pious and sentimental, sometimes overly so, some would say. These pictures and statues also give the impression that Jesus and Mary were white Europeans. This sometimes led African peoples to associate Christianity with white western Europeanism. This association can affect the



spiritual consciousness of black people: Jesus looks very much like a foreigner in Africa and not like someone who wants to take flesh also on African soil. Jesus and Mary were Galilean Jews and thus would probably have had more swarthy features which resemble modern-day persons of the Middle East.

There is every reason why in our schools we should have images of Jesus and Mary which show them as Africans or as Semitic peoples. Jesus and Mary belong to all peoples and to all cultures.

The Mafa Christian communities in North Cameroon in 1973 wished to have an African representation of the gospel. In stained-glass windows in European medieval cathedrals, the environment and characters shown belong to that society; likewise, in Jesus Mafa paintings the characters and the environment belong to Africa. The images speak to people of the Cameroon; they understand right away the sense of the scene which is placed in familiar surroundings.



## The Sign of the Cross

The Sign of the Cross is made by touching the forehead with the right hand (while saying “In the name of the Father ...”), then the middle of the breast (“and of the Son ...”), then the left shoulder (“and of the Holy Spirit ...”) and finally the right shoulder (“Amen”). This makes a cross — an intersection of a vertical line from forehead to breast and a horizontal line from left to right shoulder.

The Sign of the Cross is an expression of our belief in the Trinity. Through it, we remind ourselves of the Father’s love for us, of the sacrifice Jesus made to give us eternal life, and of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. The Sign of the Cross, then, is a confession of faith and a mark of discipleship. Making the Sign of the Cross helps to place us in the frame of mind for prayer.

Tracing the shape of the Cross on our own bodies is a tactile action. Catholics use such material and physical means to help us turn to God, as do people of other faiths. Some Jews routinely sway back and forth during prayer (apparently a reference to Psalm 35, which says “All my limbs shall declare, ‘O Lord, who is like You?’”), thus integrating body, mind and spirit in their prayer. Muslims face the Kabah in Mecca during prayer, and adopt a position with the toes, knees, palms of the hands and forehead touching the ground as a gesture of submission to Allah while repeating, “Praise be to you, my Lord, the most High.”





# Vestments

## Why does the priest wear vestments when celebrating Mass?

It is a common practice in many societies to invest those practising certain vocations with some particular dress which designates their function and office. One thinks of policemen, nurses and judges. And so the priest, too, dons particular garments when celebrating Mass.

Having the priest dressed in vestments adds to the solemnity of the Mass. Vestments also help the priest be more conscious of his responsibility.



### Among the Jews

In the Jewish Scriptures very exact and elaborate instructions are given for the “glorious adornment” of the High Priest Aaron “as will set him apart for his sacred service as My priest” (see Exodus 28). The sacred vestments, which Aaron’s sons also wore, included a breastplate, an ephod (a short cloak, without sleeves), a robe, a brocade tunic, a mitre and a sash. The sacred vestments were passed down to his descendants, that in them they may be anointed and ordained (Exodus 29:29). The veneration of the Jewish people for the vestments of the high priest was so great that they kept a lamp constantly burning before the repository of the sacred robes.

## Origin of vestments in the Catholic Church

The historical origin and development of church vestments is a rather complex matter. Some assume that the vestments of the Christian Church were modeled after those of the Jewish levitical priesthood, but the more common view is that they evolved from the ordinary dress of the Roman citizenry in the first few centuries of the Christian era.

## Colours of the Vestments

Four colours are ordinarily used: white, red, green, and purple. Each colour has its own significance.

When we wish to denote purity and innocence, or glory, resurrection, celebration and joy, **white** is used, as on the feasts of Our Lord (such as Christmas and Easter) and of the Blessed Virgin, and on the festivals of saints who were not martyrs.

**Red** is the colour of blood and fire and the love of the Holy Spirit; it is used on Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday) and Good Friday, in Masses of the Holy Spirit, such as on Pentecost, to remind us of the tongues of fire, and on the feasts of all saints who shed their blood for their faith.

**Purple** is expressive of penance; it is used during Lent and Advent.

The **green** of new life and hope is used mostly during what is called “Ordinary Time”, the season between Pentecost and Advent.



## Vestment items

**The Alb.** The long white gown worn by the priest. *Alb* means “white”. It symbolises the purity of the soul with which the Sacrifice of the Mass should be offered.



**The Cincture** (from the Latin *cinctura*, a girdle) is the cord worn around the waist to bind the alb.

**The Stole** is a long narrow scarf-like vestment, worn over the shoulders with the ends hanging down in front. The stole signifies priestly office. A priest does not minister on his own authority but because he has been ordained into the priesthood of the church.



**The Chasuble.** The sleeveless outer garment, and the most conspicuous of the vestments. The word chasuble is from the Latin *casula*, a little house, because it is, as it were, a little shelter. It is similar to a “poncho”, a roughly oval piece of cloth, with a round hole in the middle for the head.

Chasubles are made in the liturgical colours (red, white, green and purple being the most frequently used) and are sometimes decorated with symbols.

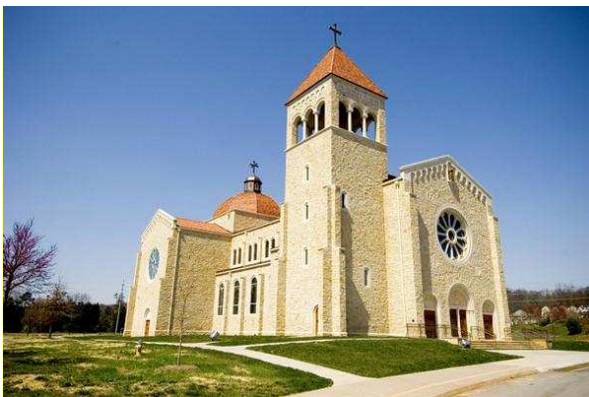


**Deacon's stole.** Worn over the left shoulder and hanging diagonally across to the right.

The diaconate is one of the three ordained offices in the Church (the others are those of priest and bishop). While the diaconate was maintained from earliest Apostolic times in the Eastern churches, it mostly disappeared in the Western church. It continued in a vestigial form as a temporary, final step along the course to ordination to the priesthood. Following the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council, the ancient practice of ordaining to the diaconate men who were not candidates for priestly ordination was restored. These men are known as permanent deacons in contrast to those ordained to the diaconate who intend to continue to priestly ordination, for whom the diaconate is temporary.

The ministry of a deacon is similar to but also different from that of a priest. A deacon is ordained to minister to the needy and the poor and to be a minister of Word and Sacrament, working in close fraternal co-operation with priests. While all Christians are called to serve others, the deacon is an official sign of this service and he solemnly promises to be a living example of such service for others. The Greek word ‘*diakonos*’ means ‘servant’.

Deacons, who may be married and also have a secular profession, carry out baptisms, preach, distribute Holy Communion and bring Holy Communion to the sick. They may be the minister of exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, officiate at marriages, and officiate at funeral services. Deacons often work directly in ministry to the marginalised inside and outside the church, amongst the poor, the sick and the imprisoned.



## The architecture of Catholic churches

Many Catholic churches follow similar basic architectural principles. Most larger churches or cathedrals are built in the form of a cross, with the longer axis of the cross aligned east-west to face the rising sun. The front part of the church, where the altar is placed, is called the *sanctuary*. A room off the sanctuary, where the priest vests for Mass and items such as altar cloths used for Mass are kept, is called the *sacristy*. The part containing the pews where the congregation sits, generally the largest part of the building, is called the *nave*. Some churches have a tower or steeple.

The tower may be fitted with bells, which are rung to announce services. Churches will also have a *baptistery*, housing a font which is used for baptisms. The layout of modern church buildings is often much simpler. Smaller buildings may be a rectangular shape, missing the cross-pieces, or a circular or triangular shape.

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