



# Exploring Liturgical Signs and Symbols

Various signs and symbols are used to enhance the meaning of liturgies. Understanding the meaning and appropriate uses of these signs and symbols enables the liturgy planner to make full use of them in liturgy planning.

**Oil** is an ancient symbol still used by the Church. In Greek and Roman times, oil was used for hygiene; people poured oil on their bodies and scraped it off along with the dirt. Athletes used oil to make them more agile. Oil was once used as a preservative for wine, sealing out air. Perfumed oils were used in burial rituals as well as personal enhancement.

Liturgical anointing with oil was symbolic of a special relationship between a person or object and God. In the Old Testament, memorial tablets were anointed (Genesis 31:13) as well as the priest (Exodus 8:12) and the king (I Samuel 10:1).

In the New Testament, oil was associated with healing. The oil used for medical and hygienic purposes became a symbol of healing of both body and spirit (James 5:14).

Today, oil is used as a sign of healing in the Anointing of the Sick. In Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders it symbolises our being set aside and sealed to do the work of the Lord.

Oil is a symbol rich in the Catholic tradition and one which can be effectively used in many kinds of liturgical celebrations.

**Candles** were used commonly in ancient cults to keep away evil spirits. During the days of Roman emperors, candles were a sign of honour. This symbolism crept into the Church after the fourth century when there emerged the practice of carrying candles before the priest processing into the church.

In Jerusalem, candles were a sign of joy. The “light of Christ” we hear intoned three times at the Easter Vigil service is symbolic of Christ as the son of righteousness. The candle used that night is called the Paschal Candle, named for Christ, our Paschal Lamb. Paschal comes from Pasch – the Hebrew Passover which Christ celebrated with His disciples at the Last Supper. The Paschal Candle represents the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many parishes today made special use of the Paschal Candle at baptisms and prayer services. It is a large beeswax candle blessed at the beginning of the Easter vigil and carried solemnly into the Church. As it is carried, the “Exultet”, a joyful song praising Christ as our Light is sung.

Candles are commonly lit at the beginning of worship as a sign of sacred action. The Sanctuary candle is a reminder of Jesus’ real presence in the Eucharist housed in the church or chapel.

Candles are appropriate for many kinds of prayer services, particularly when their light illuminates a real darkness to symbolise the light of Christ illuminating our lives.

**Incense** is a mixture of resins such as the resin of pine trees. Incense was historically used to overcome pleasant odours.

In the Old Testament (Psalm 141), incense was a sign of adoration. The early church rejected the use of incense because of its association with pagan rites. Tertullian, an early Christian writer, tells us that incense was, however, used for the cult of the dead.

The Eastern churches were the first to use incense as an expression of joy. Gradually incense began to have religious significance in the West. By 1800 A.D. incense was used in Gaul at the offertory to symbolise the sacrifice rising to God.

When burned on a piece of lighted charcoal, the incense ascends as a fragrance. Today, it is a beautiful symbol of the human spirit rising to God in prayer.

**Laying on of hands** is a gesture with many symbolic meanings. In the Old Testament, it was a form of blessing (Leviticus 1:4, 8:14) to signify something being offered or handed over to another. The laying of hands on the bull to be sacrificed indicated its being handed over to God. Property and inheritance was also transferred from one person to another through this gesture (Genesis 27:27-29).

In the New Testament, laying on of hands is a gesture of blessing (Mark 10:16), of healing (Mark 6:5, 18:18, James 5:14), of imparting the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15) and of church authority (Acts 6:1-6).

Today, the laying on of hands is part of the symbolism in the liturgies of Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders and the Anointing of the Sick. It is often used in other liturgies to symbolise a blessing being offered over another.

**Bread** is an essential part of our following Christ's example at the Last Supper each time we celebrate the Eucharist. It is a tradition of the Church that the bread be made from wheat. It is a tradition of the Latin Church that the bread be unleavened.

"The nature of the sign demands that the material for the Eucharistic celebration appear as natural food. The Eucharistic bread, even though unleavened and traditional in form, should therefore be made in such a way that the priest can break it and distribute the parts to at least some of the faithful? (Sacramentary, page 85).

While small hosts may be more practical for liturgies with a large number of communicants, the use of loaves of bread will more clearly show the eucharist as a sign of unity – one bread shared by one family.

A very meaningful addition to Eucharistic celebrations is the baking of the bread by the participants.

**Water** a traditional sign of life and cleansing, has a long standing tradition of use in liturgies. References to water abound in Scripture and water continues to play an important role in the symbolism used by the modern church.

Contemporary liturgies make use of many other kinds of symbols and signs to emphasize the messages of the Scriptures.

**Nature signs** such as rocks, flowers, trees and seeds are often used to focus attention on liturgical themes including strength, beauty, life and lifelessness, growth and promise.

**Visuals** such as pictures, common materials (barbed wire, wood, bricks), banners, models (cross, empty tomb) and slides are widely used to enhance liturgies. Ideas for contemporary signs and symbols are limited only to your imagination.

**Modes of expression** symbolically enhance liturgies. Liturgical dance and gestures create physical symbols. Sign language brings new meaning to traditional hymns and liturgical songs.

Drama can be employed in many ways. Dramatized or pantomimed scripture readings relate the stories in an interesting and lively fashion. Role-playing can often illustrate a lesson, problem, moral or situation far better than a talk on the same subject.

**Colour** is very effective in communicating an atmosphere. Traditional vestment colours are as follows:

- (a) White is used in the offices and Masses of the Easter and Christmas seasons; on feasts and memorials of the Lord, other than of his passion; on feasts and memorials of Mary, the angels, saints who were not martyrs, All Saints (1 November), John the Baptist (24 June), John the Evangelist (27 December), the Chair of St Peter (22 February) and the Conversion of St Paul (25 January).
- (b) Red is used on Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday) and Good Friday, Pentecost celebrations of the Lord's passion, birthday feasts of the apostles and evangelists, and celebrations of martyrs.
- (c) Green is used in the offices and Masses of Ordinary Time.
- (d) Violet is used in Lent and Advent. It may also be worn in offices and Masses for the dead.
- (e) Black may be used in Masses for the dead.
- (f) Rose may be used on Gaudete Sunday (Third Sunday of Advent) and Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent).

However, variety of colour and choice of fabric and texture can enhance the effect of vestments as an outward sign of the specific mystery of faith being celebrated.

The use of colour is not limited only to vestments. Participants wearing certain colours make a vivid symbolic statement. Other liturgical decorations (banners, posters, mobiles, graphics) and the choice of lighting can intensify the symbolism.

**Music** plays a key role in many liturgical celebrations. It establishes a mood, increases consciousness of the theme, and unites the congregation in a common prayer offered in unison. Instrumental music or other music not intended for congregational singing can also be used to enhance liturgies.