

On this, your night of grace, O holy Father, accept this candle, a solemn offering, the work of bees and of your servants' hands, an evening sacrifice of praise, this gift from your most holy Church. A major lure for me as a child in attending the Easter Vigil was the opening of the Mass during which I was able to hold my own candle. It was mine–nobody else's. And if I dripped hot wax on my fingers, I could only blame myself. But at an early age, I was hooked.

It strikes some as odd that the Church solemnly proclaims a hymn in praise of a candle, but indeed we do. St. Jerome attests to an “established custom” of this liturgical hymn in a letter he wrote to Deacon Praesidius in 384.¹ The *Exultet* extols the skill of the bees in producing honey and wax from flowers. St. Jerome felt that any mention of bees in a liturgical text was “entirely out of place”–yes, there's a skunk every garden party!

The praise of the bees is quite lengthy in medieval versions of the *Exultet*. Illuminated manuscripts are replete with painstakingly drawn images of beekeeping. The phrase “busy as bees” even makes an appearance in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. I am not having a middle-aged moment, confusing the Easter Vigil with science or literature class–there's a reason. The beehive's communal nature lent itself to observations of orderliness, tranquility and cooperation. In this, there is a lesson here for all of us.

Though several early versions exist, this hymn in praise of the candle and the Easter mystery was clearly inspired by St. Ambrose, who more than any other writer saw in the bee a symbol of purity. Perhaps this explains why he is the patron saint of beekeepers and candlemakers! While he was mistaken regarding the science of the insect's reproduction, the purity of the beeswax was then, and remains today far superior to any other candle. For this reason, church candles are traditionally 51% beeswax by design.

¹ Jerome, epistle 28, *Ad Praesidium, De Cereo paschali*, (Presidio was a deacon from Piacenza), ca. 384 A.D.

The virtues of the bees² serve only as a precursor, a foreshadowing-leading seamlessly to the all-important topic of the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, mentioned later in the hymn. Symbolism plays a central role in our Catholic faith. The significance of Easter may only be appreciated in its fullness with its themes of darkness being overcome by light, life springing from death, triumph emerging from apparent defeat and despair. The Light flowing from the Candle remains a dominant visual theme, evoking in us the power that flows from our Savior's resurrection.

The grains of incense fixed in the Paschal Candle in the form of a Cross at the beginning of Mass, mark this pillar of victory with the sign of the instrument of death's hollow threat. The grains represent the five wounds of Jesus and the perfumes that Mary Magdalene and her companions had prepared for embalming his body in the tomb.

We are called through our Baptism to carry that new light into the world. Our readings this evening briefly outline salvation history, the creation of man in God's image and likeness; the faithfulness of Abraham in time of testing, the father of nations; the Lord's rescue of the Chosen people from their slavery; the mercy shown through enduring love to the people of the covenant; the tenderness of a merciful Lord; the call to the spiritually thirsty to seek the Lord while he may be found; the wisdom that only comes from walking in the way of God; and the newness of life offered by Christ if we but die to sin and rise in the waters of Baptism.

Tonight, five "elect" in our midst will be washed in the saving waters of Baptism, sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation and partake of the Eucharistic banquet of the Lamb for the first time. Along with several others who will be confirmed, they have all experienced the powerful draw of **truth, beauty and goodness.**

² The inspiration for Ambrose's praise of the bees is likely Virgil's *Georgics* IV: 87, "*ingentis animos angusto in pectore versant* (In their tiny chests beat mighty hearts)". See A. Chupungco, "Exultet," **Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity**, Vol. One (A-E), page 910, produced by the Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum.

They have discovered **truth**, in the fundamental teachings of the Faith, admirably taught by Deacon Stephen Hilgendorf; **beauty**, through sacred art, architecture and music right here at the Cathedral, as we have all witnessed even tonight; **goodness**, by means of the loving example of their sponsors and you, the faithful present here tonight. We welcome them joyfully on this holy night.

All together, we proclaim unequivocally that the light of Christ, symbolized by the Easter candle, has scattered the darkness of the world. Jesus' resurrection is a transition into God's eternity and a fulfillment of all that remained hopelessly unfulfilled on earth.

The word for this night is simply *hope*, a hope that remains our fundamental reason for living, and a joy that must extinguish and transform the loneliness and despair in our world with the light of Christ's glory.

We must not remain sitting here—we like Mary Magdalene and the women, must go into the Galilee of our time—our families, our cities, our nation—and lovingly yet courageously proclaim that the emptiness of the tomb has brought about the fullness of life in us. He has been raised; he is not here. Let us go forth to proclaim the Good News.