



Grandma's Candle: Christ our Light guides us through the storms of life

By Julie McCarty

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I lit a candle today, a simple cream-colored pillar resting in a humble glass base. I was feeling annoyed, hurt, and confused about a certain situation. This situation shocked and horrified me, but it was something over which I have little or no control. When I tried to pray about it, my emotional circuit overloaded—I just couldn't find the words to express myself to God. So, I lit a candle.

Lighting a candle is something I learned from my Irish grandmother. As a preschool age child, I was fascinated with Grandma's fancy prayer candle that glowed in the dark of her bedroom when I spent the night at her house. It was a little votive light inside a red glass container. The glass rested in an elaborate golden-colored metal frame studded with sparkling jewels. I assumed this was real gold and jewels, like those worn by kings and queens in my fairy tale books. Standing in Grandma's darkened room at night, the patterns of red and gold light dancing on the walls and illuminating the statue of Mary, I felt the same awe I had when my dad turned on the Christmas tree lights.



One time when I visited Grandma during the daytime, the wind suddenly picked up and the sky grew dark. A thunderstorm was approaching, something my relatives took fairly seriously in those days. Their homes were exposed on rural hillsides that made them a good target. Besides the danger to humans, there was the unspoken fear that livestock and stored crops, on which one's livelihood depended, might perish in a fire started by lightning.

Before the storm reached us, Grandma brought her prayer candle into the living room. As she lit it, she explained to me that one should always pray for people who are caught outside during bad weather. There were farmers working in the fields who might not be able to get inside in time. People who were out driving in cars might be facing slick roads. (No cell phones back then to check on family members, only prayers!) After pausing quietly for a few moments, Grandma returned to her ordinary tasks of the day, but the flame of the candle continued to burn, reminding us of our prayer intention.

Forty years later, I no longer think to light a candle in a storm. I grab a flashlight instead, not with the noble pursuit of praying for others, but in case I lose that treasured possession called electricity! But Grandma's example was not in vain. I still light a candle when I have something special on my mind to place before the Lord.

Prayer candles remind us that Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Christ is so essential that he is like the sun that brings life to all creation. Without the sun, our entire global ecosystem would collapse overnight. For the Christian, Christ is crucial.

It is God's plan that we, too, become bearers of this light of Christ. "You are the light of the world," says Jesus (Matt. 5:14). Our baptismal candles, lit from the Easter candle, signify that we are to be filled with the light of Christ. We are called to empty ourselves of all greed, envy, lust, hatred, and the ruthless drive for power, so that our hearts may be open, like a votive candle holder, to receive more fully the flame of God's Spirit.

Christ's light continues to burn throughout all centuries, a flame of love that, like the burning bush, is not consumed. God's love is ever-faithful, ever-true. Christ is the Light who brings wisdom and prudence in dealing with all the challenges we face. Christ is always waiting for us, a candle burning bright amidst the storms of life. 

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