



28. What Is A Votive Candle?

'Votive' means that something is given or offered in fulfilment of a vow. So if a candle is a votive candle it would have meant, originally, that it was dedicated to fulfil someone's vow.

So a woman in labour, or, perhaps, a soldier hard-pressed in battle, might pray, 'Dear Lord, or St Mary, or St George, if we come alive out of this I will offer a candle in your honour.' This is why, particularly in Roman Catholic churches, one frequently sees groups of candles or lights lit in chapels dedicated to the various saints.

Light, particularly a living flame, such as that of a candle, has long been a symbol of faith. That is why a lit candle is given to someone newly baptised.

In Anglican worship, we are concerned that while worshippers may sometimes find it helpful to pray with the saints, they should not pray to them.

Until recently, the lighting of votive candles was generally discouraged. But people, particularly if they are unused to prayer, have found in the lighting of a candle a means of making an act of private worship that might otherwise be difficult for them.

Many Anglican churches, including St Albans Abbey, have provision for the lighting of votive candles as a means of offering prayer, without their being associated with devotion to individual saints. The candle, from being an offering in fulfilment of a vow made in prayer, has become symbolically the prayer itself, a simple act of devotion.

The thinking behind the votive candle was well expressed in a notice I saw recently in a French church, which I have translated:

I don't know how to pray

I can't find the words

I haven't got much time

BUT

The candle I offer is a bit of what I have

a bit of my time

a bit of myself

Which I offer to the Lord . . .

The light of this candle stands for my prayer

And it goes on, as I go on my way.'