

Why do you do that?

A little book of answers

New to faith? Or perhaps you've forgotten? Or your new church does things that are unfamiliar? Or you've come to the cathedral for a special occasion and some things seem strange?

Here are some simple explanations of actions and customs that are used in church.



A cathedral **verger** leads processions holding a ceremonial staff or verge (Latin *virga*, a rod). Historically, when processions went through the streets, the verger made a way through the crowds. Today, in big services with many robed participants, vergers will lead different groups to different areas of seating; they are essential for the smooth flow of services with thousands of people.

Most of their work is behind the scenes: from setting up for a small service of Holy Communion early in the morning (right picture), to putting out chairs and welcoming mourners for a funeral, to getting the toys ready for the toddler group, to working the sound desk for choral Evensong and setting the fire alarm as they lock up for the night.

The Sign of the Cross and other actions



'In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.'

Why make the sign of the cross or kneel?

It's an **acted prayer**. Faith is more than agreeing to ideas, it is shaping the whole of your life in obedience to Jesus Christ. Kneeling or making the sign of the cross (or prostrating yourself or bowing) are ways of praying with your body and involving all of you with God, not only your mind.

The sign of the cross is a reminder of your baptism, when the sign of Christ was traced on you for the first time. If you use holy water to make the sign of the cross when you come into church, that makes the reminder even stronger.

You can do it when you begin any prayer 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen'. There are various places where it's customary during church services. And you can make the sign on your bed at night and when you first get up in the morning and greet the Lord.

The King of us all - showing respect

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When people meet Her Majesty the Queen, most will bow or curtsy.

Many Christians feel it's appropriate to show at least the same respect to God in church.

Kneeling, bowing, genuflecting - or maybe just raising your arms

At especially holy times such as Holy Week, you might lie prostrate on the ground in prayer, or as a sign of repentance. Like kneeling, this stresses God's majesty and is an act of humility. **Kneeling to pray helps you be focused and alert;** you're not just slumping in your chair letting it all wash over you. In some Christian traditions the most common sign of respect is **raising the arms in the air** during worship.

Genuflecting is going down briefly on one knee. In those Christian traditions that stress the presence of Christ in the communion elements, it is usual to genuflect or bow before going up to receive communion, to signal that **you believe that you will be receiving Jesus Christ** into your hand and heart. You might also bow towards the altar at other times, when entering or leaving church. Someone reading from the Gospel might kiss the book. It might also be lifted high in procession to give honour.

Prayer made visible



'Let my prayer rise as incense before you, O Lord, and the lifting up of my hands be as the evening sacrifice.'
(Psalm 141.1)

Incense

Incense symbolises prayer and also signifies **holiness**.

It is resin (solidified tree sap), with added perfume. It is burnt on hot charcoal, usually in a metal container called a thurible, hung from chains so it can be swung around to keep the coals red-hot. Incense was used daily in the Jerusalem Temple. In the New Testament, the Christ child is given incense by the wise men, and the elders and the living creatures in the Book of Revelation offer bowls of incense to God, 'which are the prayers of the saints' (Rev 5.8).

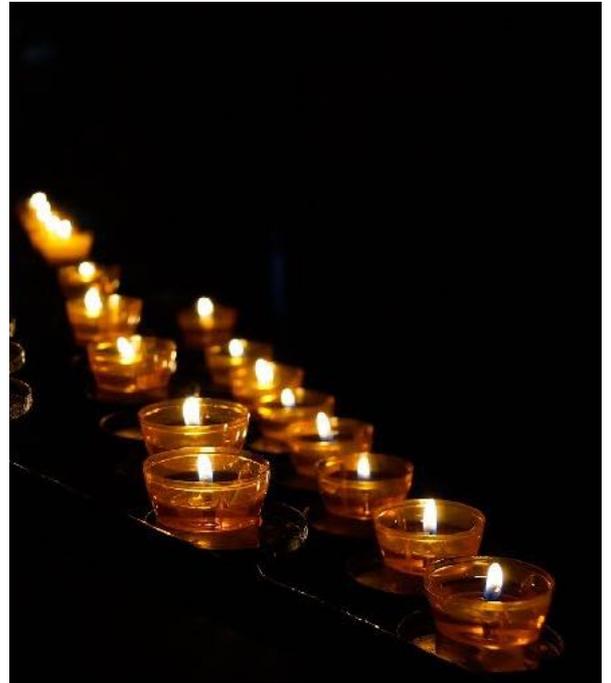
In Christian worship, incense is offered to God in connection with the Gospel reading and the eucharistic prayer; both are **moments of encounter with Jesus Christ**. The people are also *censed* (have incense waved at them), because Christ is present in us and makes us holy. The sweet smell of the incense suggests **the sweetness of the Lord's presence among us**. *'I can smell God!'*

The Light of Christ



The
Light of Christ!
Thanks be to
God!

-from the Easter Vigil



Candles

The Paschal candle which is lit at the Easter Vigil is a symbol of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. As a candle gives light and is used up in the process, so Jesus gives light to the world at the cost of his own life.

At the Easter Vigil, all the candles are lit from the Paschal candle, to signify that the risen Lord gives light and life to the whole world. So the candles are more than light to see by: they are a symbol of the **divine presence**.

We also light candles to **make our personal prayers visible**. A stand where many little candles are burning can remind us that, even if we are alone when we make our prayer, the whole Christian community carries us with their prayers, and we have a part to play in carrying other people. **This makes visible the communion of saints**, the Body of Christ stretching through time and space; because 'all time belongs to him and all ages - Christ yesterday and today and for ever'.

Vestments

- clothed in Christ

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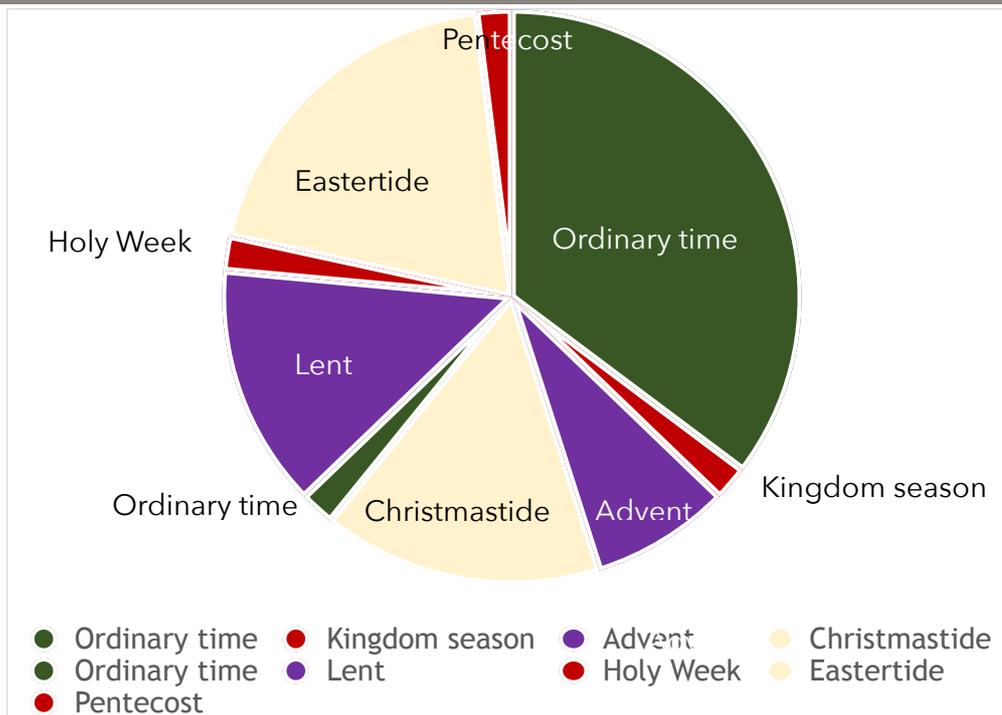


The altar servers in front, in this picture, are wearing the *alb*, which symbolises that **we are clothed in Christ** at our baptism. *Albus* means white, and from earliest times to the present day, the newly-baptised are clothed in white, as are the saints in heaven, according to Revelation.

A priest at the Eucharist will also wear a *stole* in the liturgical colour of the season or the day, e.g. white for Easter, purple for Lent, red for a martyr. They may also wear a *chasuble* in the same colour over the stole, so that you only see the ends (right picture). This was smart streetwear in the early church period, and was retained as 'best clothes' for church when fashions changed. (This happened again at the Reformation with gowns.)

As well as being handy colour-coding, wearing the uniform signals that it's not about the individual priest's dress sense or personality. The priest is the 'church on legs' and **embodies its teaching authority, its faith, its existence as the Body of Christ** through space and time, back to Jesus and forward to his second coming.

The Christian year



The cycle of feasts and fasts takes us through the life of Christ in each year. The Christian year begins on **Advent** Sunday, when we look forward to the birth of Christ at Christmas and also look forward to his second coming at the end of time. In the spiritual life we need times of soberness and also times of celebration that look forward to the eternal feast of heaven.

Christmastide begins at **Christmas** and goes on for forty days, till the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. There is usually then a little bit of ordinary time, and then **Lent** begins on Ash Wednesday. We think of Christ being tempted in the desert, and try to work on our own chief temptations, taking on extra prayer, fasting and service, as we are able. **Holy Week** is the most intensive entering into Christ's Passion, leading up to the celebration of the Resurrection on **Easter** Day.

Eastertide continues for fifty days until **Pentecost**, taking in **Ascension** Day. Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit, the birthday of the Christian church. There follows the long season of Ordinary time, when we simply grow quietly. At the end of the year we look forward to Christ reigning as King, for year by year the Kingdom is growing in our midst.

We can see this too as we celebrate **saints' days** throughout the year.

Oil to make a cheerful countenance (Ps 104.15)



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'Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.'
- James 5.14

We are embodied spirits, so what our bodies experience affects our spiritual life. New Christians are anointed with pure olive oil and sealed for Christ before baptism - they are *catechumens*, those under instruction. Chrism (olive oil with balsam) is used in baptism, confirmation and ordination, symbolising the blessings of the messianic era and the richness of the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, prophets, priests and kings were all anointed to symbolise the empowering grace of the Holy Spirit working through them. The British monarch is anointed with chrism at the coronation.

Anointing is a sacrament, an action which does what it signifies.

Music for the ears and tongue, candles for the eyes, incense for the nose, oil for the skin: we can worship God with all our senses.