“Let the great candle that is to be blessed be placed in the candlestick before the altar in the middle of the church,” read the rubrics for Holy Saturday in an Italian Sacramentary of the early twelfth century in the Pierpont Morgan Library. This is the paschal candle which was solemnly blessed and ceremoniously lighted on Easter Eve—as similar candles were blessed and lighted all over the mediaeval Christian world—to symbolize the glory of Christ’s resurrection. In the imagery of the Benediction, the paschal candle was the “Light of Christ” which illuminated the earth with resplendent rays, dissipating the darkness of the night.

Before the ceremony of Easter Eve, all of the lamps and candles in the church were extinguished. In the meantime, new fire had been struck from flint or kindled from the sun’s rays shining on a crystal. Then, “after the ninth hour,” into the darkened church came the procession of clergy bearing incense and a taper alight with flame from the new fire. In the service that followed it was the deacon rather than the priest who officiated. Durandus, a thirteenth-century bishop of Mende, has a strange explanation for this in his Rationale divinorum officiorum: “The candle is blessed by the deacon, who is of lower rank, because the risen Christ appeared first to Mary Magdalene, who was of the weaker sex.” Be that as it may, from the time of Saint Jerome, when deacons composed their own poems in praise of the candle, to the later Middle Ages, when all that was required of a deacon was a good memory and a good singing voice, the blessing of the Easter candle was the high moment of the deacon’s year.

Vested in a white dalmatic because white is the liturgical color for Easter and “blessing the candle pertaineth to the Resurrection,” the deacon carrying the lighted taper thrice intoned Lumen Christi, the “Light of Christ,” first at the doorway, then in the center of the church, and finally before the altar, each time on a higher tone. Each time the faithful responded “Thanks be to God.” Then, mounting the gospel ambo near which “the great candle” had been placed, he began to sing “in a melodious voice” the magnificent Exultet provided by the Roman ritual for the Benediction:

“Let now the angelic hosts of heaven exult [Exultet iam angelica turba coelorum]; let the divine mysteries be joyfully celebrated; and let a sacred trumpet proclaim the victory of so great a King. Let the earth also rejoice being illuminated with such radiant light; and let men know that the splendor of our eternal King has chased away the darkness which overspread the whole world. . . . For this is the paschal solemnity, in which the true Lamb was slain, by whose blood the doors of the faithful are consecrated. . . . This is the night in which Christ broke the chains of death and ascended conqueror from hell. . . . This is the night of which it is written: And the night shall be as light as the day and the night is my illumination of my delights. Therefore the holiness of this night blots out crimes, washes away sins. . . . It banishes enmities, produces concord and humbles empires.”

Here, according to the Morgan Sacramentary, the deacon fixed five grains of incense into the candle “in the form of a cross” and then continued his chant. At the words “And now we know the excellence of this pillar which the bright fire lights for the honor of God,” the deacon or the subdeacon lighted the candle from the taper bearing the flame of the new fire. All the other candles and lamps in the church were then lighted with the paschal flame, and the “night became as bright as day” as the deacon arrived at his final “Amen.”
Easter candlestick of carved and gilded wood with painted panels of prophets and saints. Spanish, xv century. On exhibition for the first time in the Late Gothic Hall at The Cloisters. Height 6 feet 5 inches. Fletcher Fund, 1944. Photograph by Charles Sheeler.
Blessing the Easter candle. The deacon blessing the candle holds in his left hand a roll on which is written the Exultet chant. From a xi century Exultet roll in Troia Cathedral

Durandus elucidates the ceremony in his pedantic but undeniably informative manner. The “old fire” which was extinguished from all the lamps and candles of the church symbolized the “old law which reached its fulfillment by the death of Christ”; the “new fire” was the new law, that is to say, Christ himself. The five grains of incense impressed into the candle in the form of a cross signified first “the wounds of Christ” and second “the ointments which the women brought to anoint the crucified one.” “Soon after placing the grains of incense,” says Durandus, “the candle is lighted because after the passion followed the glory of the Resurrection . . . . The candles and other torches of the church are lighted with the flame of the largest candle to show that the flame of the Holy Spirit proceeds from Christ and that not only the apostles and prophets . . . . but also all the faithful of the church have been illuminated by Him.”

The service of Easter Vigils by no means ended with the blessing of the candle. Immediately after this came the long reading of the Prophecies and finally the blessing of the baptismal font, during which the priest plunged the paschal candle, still lighted, thrice into the water “to signify the coming of the Holy Ghost, who descended into the water of the baptism in the form of a dove.” Baptism of children and catechumens followed, then the singing of the Litanies, and finally the first Mass of Easter Sunday. The great candle continued burning throughout this long Easter Vigil, so that in the early morning hours there was fulfillment of the deacon’s benediction, “May the morning star find its flame alight, that star which never sets.”
Lighting the Easter candle. The deacon holds the candle while the subdeacon lights it with a taper on the end of a long reed. The elaborate candlestick seems to be decorated with flowers. From an xi century Exultet roll in the Collegiate Church of Mirabella-Eclano
The Easter candle was re-lighted for all masses and solemn offices of the Church for at least the forty days between Easter and Ascension Day. There was thus a practical as well as a mystical need for a “truly large candle.” Records show that the size varied, apparently in accordance with the size and financial status of the church. Thirty pounds seems to have been the average weight. The “pascal” used at Canterbury in 1457, however, weighed three hundred pounds, and the one used at Salisbury in 1517 was thirty-six feet high. Candles of such size were naturally expensive, and it was often necessary to tax the parishioners to pay for them. Sometimes, however, they were maintained by gift or bequest. The will of one Nicholas Huberb, dated 1496, contains this item: “To Otteford Church, a cowe to maintain the Paschall there for ever.” The paschal candle was always fashioned, according to regulations, of pure beeswax, and in the Exultet chant the contribution of the bees was gratefully acknowledged. Many early texts even include a long eulogy of the bees, Virgilian in flavor but with the characteristically Christian ending: “O truly happy and marvelous bee, . . . who is productive and yet chaste; it is thus that Mary, saintly above all creatures, conceived; Virgin, she brought forth and Virgin she remained.”

Candlesticks to hold the precious paschal candle were also of large dimension and were often carefully wrought and elaborately decorated. Sometimes, as at Saint Ouen in Rouen and at Bourges, they were of wax like the candles; more often they were of metal or wood or stone. The fine Easter column at Hildesheim is of bronze, sculptured in a spiral with scenes from the life of Christ, and paschal pillars of marble embellished with “cosmati” work are still to be seen in many Italian churches. King Canute, it is told, gave a silver candlestick to Winchester, and Abbot Desiderius ordered one of silver-gilt for his rich and famous Abbey of Monte Cassino. The 1460 inventory of the Cathedral of Gerona in Spain lists a “gilded wooden column to hold the paschal candle,” and we know that in the early sixteenth century the Cathedral of Seville owned a wooden Easter candlestick ornamented with paintings by Alejo Fernandez.

The Museum is proud to exhibit at The Cloisters for the first time this Easter season a Spanish paschal candlestick of wood, carved
and gilded, with painted panels of prophets and saints. It is a modest six feet five inches in height and is constructed in the form of a hexagonal shaft tapering at the top. Since a large number of existing mediaeval candlesticks are fashioned like shafts or columns and since “Columna,” “Colona,” and “Pascall post” are the terms most often used in the inventories and account books, we may conclude that when a candlestick is constructed in this form, it was intended to create a concrete visual image of the symbolism in the Exultet chant, in which the lighted candle signified not only the resurrection of Christ, but also the “pillar of fire” that guided the children of Israel out of the wilderness. An illustration in the thirteenth-century Exultet manuscript of Pisa actually shows this “pillar of fire” as a solid architectural column surrounded by flames.

The gilded carving of our “Easter column” is rich and varied. Besides the typical cusped and traceried arches and crocketed shafts, there are acanthus plants in bud, tongues of flame, tiny grotesque creatures like horny-headed snails or dragons, and stars against an azure sky. All provide innumerable facets for catching and reflecting the Easter candlelight. The saints and prophets, illumined by the “light of Christ,” are boldly painted in tones of leaf green, salmon, olive gray, and vermilion against a background of tooled gold. In the upper tier are representatives of the Old Law: Ezekiel, whose prophecies were read at the service of Easter Vigils, Jeremiah, Zachariah (dressed like a mourner on a Burgundian tomb), and finally Adam, Eve, and the angel of the Lord who drove the disobedient pair from Paradise. The presence of the last three figures has particular significance on an Easter candlestick in view of the words of the Easter benediction: “O truly necessary sin of Adam, which the death of Christ has blotted out! O happy fault [felix culpa] that merited such and so great a Redeemer.” To be sure, certain churchmen, like Hugh of Cluny, shocked at the implications of such ecclesiastical broad-mindedness, expunged these words from the Exultet chant; they are found, however, in almost all the Spanish texts of the fifteenth century and, interestingly enough, persist in the official version in use today.

To balance the Old Law on the topmost tier, the New Law, represented by the apostles, occupies the lower register. Here are Matthew, Philip with his cross, Bartholomew with his knife, Thomas, Barnabas, and John the Evangelist with chalice and serpent. Banderoles inscribed with their names float like enlarged haloes above their heads. Several are labeled

![Saint Clara, detail of the Easter candlestick at The Cloisters. Spanish, xv century](image-url)
“Sante,” the vocative form of “Saint,” suggesting the Litanies sung before the Mass of Easter Vigils: “Sancte Andrea, Sancte Joanne, etc. . . . Ora pro nobis.”

In the middle tier are mediaeval saints who, like the apostles, were lighted with the “light of Christ” and helped by their lives to “dissipate the darkness which overspread the whole world.” Here are Saint Benedict, founder of monasticism in western Europe, wearing the Benedictine habit and carrying the crozier of his authority; Saint Anthony of Padua, preacher and worker of miracles, with the Holy Child as his attribute; Saint Bernardino of Siena, with the three miters of his rejected bishoprics and the monogram of Our Lord in his outstretched hand; the beloved Saint Francis, with a saucy heron pecking at the cord of his habit; Saint Louis of Toulouse in Franciscan garb; and Saint Clara holding an oversized rosary, her hands in an attitude of prayer.

Except for Saint Benedict, all the saints in the group occupying the central and most prominent tier are of the Franciscan order—a fact which may someday prove to be a clue to the origin of our candlestick. At the present time, however, we know only that it came from Spain and that it was formerly in the Mackay collection. It has been variously rumored to have come from Toledo, from Burgos, from Burgo de Osma. Professor Chandler Post suggests the chapel of the hospital at Buitrago, south of Burgo de Osma, since he sees in the paintings on our candlestick affinities in style to the work of Jorge Inglés, who painted the well-known retable “of the Angels” for that chapel. He would attribute the designs to the master himself and the execution to his workshop, adding that, in any case, “the paintings were carried out in the atelier of an artist to whom Jorge Inglés stood in close stylistic affiliation.” That the painter of the prophets and saints on our candlestick was working under strong Flemish influence—as was Jorge Inglés—there can be no doubt. That he was working in Castile in the latter half of the fifteenth century—as was also Jorge Inglés—seems highly probable. Beyond these statements the writer hesitates to go. Since even the gods of Spanish painting in the fifteenth century are often difficult to recognize, one scarcely dares to name the half-gods. We are in hearty accord with Professor Post, however, in his estimate of our candlestick as a distinguished piece of ecclesiastical furniture, probably the only extant example from the Middle Ages of a painted and gilded paschal candlestick worthy to be called a work of art.

The major variations in the fifteenth-century Benediction ceremony, as described in this article, are to be found in English churches that followed the Sarum rite, omitting the use of the paschal candle at the baptismal font, and in the Mozarabic chapel of Toledo, which continued to follow the Mozarabic rite, using an entirely different text from the Exultet and providing for two deacons to sing the chant. The chant in the Ambrosian rite is also different after the preface. The ceremony used in the Roman Catholic Church today varies little from that used in the Middle Ages except that now it usually takes place in the morning instead of the evening of Holy Saturday, thereby losing some of its significance.

The Morgan manuscript (M379) from which several quotations have been taken was written for the Diocese of Spoleto. It contains no illustrations of the Benediction of the candle. The illustrations of the ceremony incorporated in this article have been selected from The Exultet Rolls of South Italy by Myrtilla Avery (Princeton University Press) from photographs supplied through the courtesy of the Frick Art Reference Library.

Professor Post’s discussion of the candlestick will appear shortly in the appendix to volume IX of his History of Spanish Painting (Harvard University Press).