



## WHY IS INCENSE USED IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH DURING THE ORDER OF THE MASS?

This fragrant element of our Catholic liturgy and heritage dates to the millennia before Christ.

For many Catholics, there is something about the odor of freshly burned incense filling the church, which is spiritually uplifting. Many a person entering the Catholic Church (via the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) process) from another religion, comment about how the “*smells and bells*” of the Mass were spiritually memorable and holy for them. So, where did incense come from and why do we use it in the Sabbath Mass; at funerals; church dedications; etc.?

The use of incense in religious worship began more than 2,000 years ago and before Christianity even began to exist. The use of incense in China is documented before 2,000 BCE. Trade in incense and spices was a major economic practice between the east and west; when caravans traveled the Middle Eastern Incense Route from Yemen through Saudi Arabia [much like the Magi from the east; who visited Jesus in Bethlehem for the Epiphany]. The route ended in Israel, and it was here that it was introduced to the Roman Empire.

Religions in the western world have long used incense in their liturgical ceremonies. Incense is noted in the Jewish Talmud\* and is mentioned 170 times in the Bible. (e.g., Exodus 30:1, et al):

***“For burning incense, you shall make an altar of acacia wood ...”***

(\* The Hebrew term, Talmud (“study” or “learning”) commonly refers to a compilation of ancient rabbinical teachings regarded as sacred and normative by Jews; from the time it was compiled until modern times and is still so regarded by traditional religious Jews today.)

The use of incense in Jewish worship continued long after the beginning of Christianity and was a definite influence in the Catholic Church’s use of it in liturgical celebrations. The Church sees the burning of incense as an image of the prayers of the faithful rising-up to heaven. The symbolism is mentioned in Psalm 141:2:

***“Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering.”***

There is no specific period recorded to let us know precisely when incense was introduced into the religious services of the Church. No evidence is available to show its use during the first four centuries of the Church. However, there are references of it being used in the New Testament. Luke, in the beginning of his Gospel, speaking about the birth of John the Baptist, writes:

***“Then, when the whole assembly of people were praying outside at the hour of the incense offering, the angel of the Lord appeared to him standing at the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him.”***

Incense is a sacramental\*, used to sanctify, bless and venerate. The smoke from the incense is symbolic of the mystery of God Himself. As it rises upward, the imagery and smell convey the sweetness of Our Lord’s presence and it reinforces how the Mass is linked to Heaven and Earth, ending in the very presence of God.

(\* Sacramentals *“are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them, people are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy”* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1667).

The smoke also symbolizes the intense faith that should fill us, and the fragrance is representative of Christian virtue.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) permits the use of incense at several times during the Mass. When something like the sacrificial offerings of the Mass are incensed, the censer (thurible) is swung three times, which represents the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity.

There are various times during the Mass when incense may be used:

- During the entrance procession;
- At the beginning of Mass to incense the altar and the Cross;
- Before the Gospel reading; and
- After the paten of bread and the chalice of wine are placed on the altar to incense the assembly’s offerings to God, the Cross, the altar, the priest, and finally the people.

Additionally, incense is also used on Holy Thursday (as the Blessed Sacrament is relocated, from the main tabernacle to an alternate location of repose, until the Easter Vigil liturgy). Also, during the Easter Vigil, ***five grains of incense\**** are placed into the Paschal [Easter] Candle.

(\* 5 grains of incense (often red in color) are embedded or encased in wax "nails" that are placed in the Paschal Candle at the beginning of the Easter Vigil liturgy to represent the glorious wounds on Jesus, the Christ’s crucified body.

In closing, let us go to the Book of Revelation 8:3-4:

***“Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer (thurible). He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones on the gold altar, which was before the throne. The smoke of the incense, along with the prayers of the holy ones, went up before God from the hand of the angel.”***

Indeed, the use of incense is deeply rooted in our Catholic heritage and worship practices.

(SR: <https://aleteia.org/2018/10/19/the-history-of-incense-and-why-its-used-at-mass/>)