

MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF THE USE OF INCENSE IN CATHOLIC LITURGIES



Incense: Heavenly Fragrance for Worship

As the priest rhythmically swings the censer, the aromatic smoke from the burning incense, with its sweet fragrance of frankincense and myrrh, rises and fills the sanctuary. Then the heavenly scent wafts out to the worshippers.

“Incense, with its sweet-smelling perfume and high-ascending smoke, is typical of the good Christian’s prayer, which, enkindled in the heart by the fire of God’s love and exhaling the odor of Christ, rises up a pleasing offering in His sight,” explains the Catholic Encyclopedia.

When explaining the significance of incense, Father John Paul Mary Zeller of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Eternal Word points to the Book of Revelation and its description of heavenly worship: *“Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel”* (8:3-4). Father John Paul emphasizes that this gives a wonderful image of incense’s role in Divine Worship: *“Incense represents our prayers rising before the throne of God.”*

“We’re visual people,” explains Father John Paul. *“We take in things by our senses; our sight, smell, hearing, taste. Actually, seeing incense rising lifts our minds using our sense to the things of God. When we smell incense we might [and should] be reminded of the holiness of God, the sweetness of God, the presence of God.”*

“Let my prayer come like incense before you; the lifting up of my hands, like the evening sacrifice,” the Psalmist says (141:2).

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) refers to this verse in saying that *“incensation is an expression of reverence and of prayer, as is signified in Sacred Scripture.”* The instruction states that, if desired, incense may be used “in any form of Mass.”

A Millennium of Usage

Before looking at the whys and wherefores of incense used in the Church today, the faithful should realize its use was a practice instituted by God himself. He commanded Moses, *“You shall make an altar on which to offer incense; Aaron shall offer fragrant incense on it”* every morning and evening (Exodus 30:7-8). The altar was placed before the Ark of the Covenant. Then Leviticus 6:15 mentions frankincense to be used when offering the flour and oil of the grain.

Fast-forward to the Book of Malachi, the last prophet in the Old Testament, where we read (1:11), *“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering.”*

In the context of divine worship in the Old Testament, it was giving God what was his due.

Gifts for Jesus

And in the story of Christmas, two of the gifts the Magi brought the Child Jesus were frankincense and myrrh. Today, the same incense is obtained from two resinous trees in the Middle East (sometimes complemented with added scents, such as rose and florals).

Given the reference in Revelation, we see that early Christians were familiar with using incense and continued the sacred practice, as mentioned in fifth-century liturgies, including incensing the Gospel; by the 11th century, it was used at the offertory at the Magnificat during vespers around the 13th century; and during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament about a century later.

Modern Mass

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, 1146) notes, *“In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God.”*

The second time incense is used during Mass is before the proclamation of the Gospel. *“The words of the Lord are holy,”* explained Father John Paul. *“The Church would say Christ is speaking in his Church. It’s not just the priest, but Christ, speaking these words. So, the Gospel is incensed before the speaking of the word of the Lord.”*

The Catechism (1154) references this use of incense at this time *“to nourish the faith of believers.”*

Then, at the Offertory, the gifts of bread and wine given to Almighty God that will be changed into the Body and Blood of Our Lord are incensed *“to signify the Church’s offering and prayer rising like incense in the sight of God,”* explains the GIRM. Once again, the altar and cross are incensed. *“Immediately after that the server will incense the priest, the one who is offering the sacrifice, who will bring the unbloody sacrifice of Christ on the altar,”* Father John Paul said, further explaining that the action denotes the priest’s sacred ministry. Next, a deacon or server will incense the people present because of their baptismal dignity, and *“because we are God’s holy ones, we are the Church not in heaven yet, but St. Paul says in Corinthians, still running the race for our salvation.”*

Incense again appears at the elevation [of the sacred species of the Body and Blood], when the priest lifts up the Eucharist at the consecration. At this time, *“the server will incense the Blessed Sacrament, and then the chalice as the Blood of Christ is raised,”* explains Father John Paul.

Eastertide and Elsewhere

There are other times the heavenly aroma of incense fills the sacristy and church. During Benediction, when the Lord is solemnly exposed in the monstrance [for Holy Hour, for example], the Blessed Sacrament is incensed during the singing of *O Salutaris Hostia* and *Tantum Ergo*. When the priest gives solemn benediction, making the Sign of the Cross with the monstrance, the server will incense the Blessed Sacrament.

Father John Paul adds another use. At Sunday vespers [prayers in the Liturgy of the Hours], the altar is incensed, and incense is also used when the *Magnificat* is chanted.

Of course, when at any ceremony, the priest places the incense in the censer, or thurible, and blesses it with the Sign of the Cross, [when and where therefore] it becomes a sacramental. Father John Paul also noted “*that incense is used as protection against evil. In solemn rites of exorcism, or when doing an exorcism or blessing of the house, incense can be used.*”

There are two times incense is used without being burnt. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia:

- Unburned grains of incense are placed into the sepulcher of consecrated altars [along with the first class relic of a martyred saint].
- The other occasion is during Eastertide. At the Easter vigil, the priest places five pins (each containing a grain of incense) into the Paschal Candle to symbolize the five wounds of our Risen Savior.



Of course, during Eastertide, at Mass, the priest will incense the Paschal candle, and he will also do so during a funeral Mass. Father John Paul adds that a priest will often incense the casket “*to honor the body of the person deceased because they become a temple of the Holy Spirit by baptism.*” [Additionally, along with the unconsecrated gifts of bread and wine, the body of the decedent (in a casket or cremation urn) is offered back to God, its Creator, awaiting the resurrection of our Lord.]

As Father John Paul finds, “*The role of incense at a funeral rite has brought many people to conversion to see the dignity with which the Church treats the body.*”

In every case, incense is part of and contributes to “*the holiness of divine worship,*” Father John Paul emphasizes.

“*We want to give God his due. All these things matter that we use during liturgies to elevate our minds and hearts to the transcendent, to God.*”

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