

holy Smoke

The Use of INCENSE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH



MATTHEW O. HERRERA

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Cover photograph of the famed giant *Botafumeiro* from the *Catedral de Santiago de Compostela* in Galicia, Spain. The tradition of the *Botafumeiro* dates to the 11th century AD. One *Botafumeiro* was a gift of King Louis XI of France in 1554 and was ultimately stolen by Napoleon's troops in 1809. This current model was placed into service in 1851.



All Sacred Scripture citations are taken from the Revised Standard Version - Catholic Edition

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MATTHEW D. HERRERA

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For Father Edmund M. Idranyi

You taught me the value of
using incense every Sunday at
Divine Liturgy even when
others selfishly complained

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Introduction

The term “incense” is derived from the Latin *incendere* which means “to burn.” It is commonly used as a noun to describe aromatic matter which releases fragrant smoke when ignited, to describe the smoke itself and as a verb to describe the process of distributing the smoke.

Incense was a highly valuable commodity in ancient times. A gift of incense was something to be prized. The trading of incense and spices provided the economic basis for the famed 1,500 mile long Middle Eastern Incense Route which flourished from the third century BC to the second century AD. A route traversed with caravans of camels beginning in Yemen, crossing Saudi Arabia and Jordan and ending-up in today’s Israeli port of Gaza. From this port, incense, spices and other valuable goods were then shipped to Europe. The route made it possible for citizens of the Roman Empire to enjoy the perfume of incenses like frankincense and myrrh, the flavors of different exotic eastern spices and crucial salts for cooking and preserving food.

The use of incense in religious worship predates Christianity by thousands of years. First in the East (circa 2000 BC in China with the burning of cassia and sandalwood, etc.) and later in the West incense use has long been an integral part of many religious celebrations. Incense use is noted in the Talmud and the Bible is filled with 170 mentions of incense. The use of incense in Jewish temple worship continued well after the establishment of Christianity and certainly influenced the Catholic Church’s use of incense in its own liturgical celebrations.

The earliest *documented* history of using incense during a Catholic sacrificial liturgy comes from the Eastern side of the Church. The rituals of the Divine Liturgies of Saint James and Saint Mark dating from the 5th century AD include the use of incense. On the Western side of the Church the *Ordo Romanus VIII* of Saint Amand of the 7th century AD mentions the use of incense during the procession of a Bishop to the altar on Good Friday. Documented history of incensing the *Evangelary* (Book of Gospels) during the Mass dates from the 11th century AD. The use of incense within the liturgies continued to be developed over many years into what we are familiar with today.

While the Eastern half of the Catholic Church makes copious and wonderful use of incense during their sublime liturgies, this modest work will focus largely on the use of incense during the celebration of the Mass in the Latin Rite of the Church.

Pope Benedict XVI incenses the gifts and the altar at the offertory during the celebration of the Mass at Saint Peter’s Basilica.



Incense in Sacred Scripture

Incense (or frankincense/myrrh) is mentioned a remarkable 170 times in the Bible – 159 times in the Old Testament and 11 times in the New Testament:

Genesis 37:25, 43:11; **Exodus 25:6**, 25:29, 30:1, 30:7-9, 30:23, 30:27, 30:34-35, 30:37, 31:8, 31:11, 35:8, 35:15, 35:28, 37:16, 37:25, 37:29, 39:38, 40:5, 40:27; **Leviticus 2:1-2**, 2:15-16, 4:7, 5:11, 6:15, 10:1, 16:12-13, 24:7, 26:30; **Numbers 4:7**, 4:16, 5:15, 7:14, 7:20, 7:26, 7:32, 7:38, 7:44, 7:50, 7:56, 7:62, 7:68, 7:74, 7:80, 7:86, 16:7, 16:17, 16:18, 16:35, 16:40, 16:46, 16:47; **Deuteronomy 33:10**; **1 Samuel 2:28**; **1 Kings 3:3**, 7:50, 9:25, 10:25, 11:8, 12:33, 13:1, 13:2, 22:43; **2 Kings 12:3**, 14:4, 15:4, 15:35, 16:4, 17:11, 18:4, 22:17, 23:5, 23:8, 25:14; **1 Chronicles 6:49**, 9:29, 23:13, 28:13; **2 Chronicles 2:4**, 2:6, 4:22, 9:24, 13:11, 14:5, 24:14, 26:16, 26:18, 26:19, 28:3, 28:4, 28:5, 29:7, 29:11, 30:14, 34:4, 34:7, 34:25; **Nehemiah 13:5**, 13:9; **Ester 2:12**; **Psalms 45:8**, 141:2; **Proverbs 7:17**; **Song of Solomon 1:13**, 3:6, 4:6, 4:14, 5:1, 5:5, 5:13; **Isaiah 1:13**, 17:8, 27:9, 43:23, 60:6, 65:3, 65:7, 66:3; **Jeremiah 1:16**, 6:20, 7:9, 11:12, 11:13, 11:17, 17:26, 18:15, 19:4, 19:13, 32:29, 41:5, 44:3, 44:8, 44:15, 44:17, 44:18, 44:19, 44:21, 44:23, 44:25, 48:35, 54:18, 52:19; **Ezekiel 6:4**, 6:6, 8:11, 16:18, 23:41; **Daniel 2:46**, 3:38; **Hosea 2:13**, 11:2; **Habakkuk 1:16**; **Malachi 1:11**; **Matthew 2:11**; **Mark 15:23**; **Luke 1:9-11**; **John 19:39**; **Hebrews 9:4**; and **Revelation 5:8**, 8:3-4, 18:13.

The offering of incense as a gift to God precedes the incarnate Jesus Christ by thousands of years. In the book of Exodus we read of God directing Moses in the precise compounding of an holy incense mixture (including salt as an element of purity) known as the *Ketoret* which was used as an offering to the Lord. So precious is this blend that God forbids its secular use:

Exodus 30:34-37: *“And the Lord said to Moses, “Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you; it shall be for you most holy. And the incense which you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves; it shall be for you holy to the Lord.”*”

Incense is noted as an offering throughout the Bible. One wonderful mention is Psalm 141 – a popular psalm that is often chanted as part of Byzantine Vespers:

Psalm 141:2 *“Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!”*

Probably the most well known mention of incense in Sacred Scripture is offering of the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh to the newborn Baby Jesus. Tradition tells us that the three Maji of the East – Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar bestowed these gifts upon the Infant Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew:

Matthew 2:11: *“and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”*

The analgesic properties of incense are also noted in Gospel of Mark as the crucified Jesus is offered a drink containing myrrh. His rejection of the pain-numbing drink underscores the absolute totality of His Sacrifice -- His ultimate gift to His faithful:

Mark 15:22-23: “And they bring him into the place called Golgotha, which being interpreted is, The place of Calvary. And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh; but he took it not.”

Following His death on the cross Jesus’ Corpus is prepared for internment here on earth. Once again incense in the form of myrrh was employed:

John 19:39-40: *Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds’ weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.*

Incense was mentioned at the birth of Jesus Christ and again at his death. While the myrrh and spices no doubt had practical deodorizing and preservation qualities their main function was that of an offering. In this case the final offering to God Incarnate.

Finally it is interesting to note just how prized and important incense was in ancient Jerusalem according to the Bible. An Altar of Incense (Exodus 30:1-10) stood inside of Solomon’s Temple in the Holy Place adjacent to the Ark of the Covenant. This rectangular altar was made of acacia wood measuring one cubit (about 18”) wide, one cubit deep, and two cubits high, with a horn (*keranot*) on each corner whose top was sheathed in pure gold. It was an upright rectangular stand, with rings on opposite sides through which poles could be passed to carry it (Exodus 37:25-26.) Moses consecrated the altar with the anointing oil when the Tabernacle was dedicated (Leviticus 40:9)

Incense was burned on this altar during the morning and evening sacrifices of animals on the separate Altar of Burnt Offerings. The incense which was used had



to be made according to a specific formula (Exodus 30:34-35), and no other incense was permitted (Exodus 30:9). The offering of incense was the pinnacle of the daily morning and the evening services. According to the *Zohar* the offering of incense was the portion of the temple service that was most beloved by God.

A depiction of a Jewish high priest before the Altar of Incense as described in Exodus. Image from *The Book of Perfumes* by Eugene Rimmel.

Types of Incense

The oldest and highest quality types of incense are produced from the gum resins of select trees. The well-known *frankincense* is an oleoresin (gum resin mixed with a volatile compounding oil) from trees of the genus *Boswellia*, (family *Burseraceae*), particularly the varieties *B. frereana*, *B. bhaw-dajiana*, and *B. carteri* found in Somalia, Yemen and Oman.

Myrrh is another well-known incense. Myrrh is an oleoresin made from gum resin obtained from trees of the genus *Commiphora*, (family *Burseraceae*). The two main varieties of myrrh are herabol and bisabol. Both of these common varieties of myrrh are made from the gum resins of trees located in Ethiopia, Arabia, and Somalia.

One of the most beautiful smelling incenses (not nearly as strong as frankincense or myrrh) which is native to the Americas is *Copal Blanco* or White Copal obtained from the *Bursera jorullense* tree. This very reasonably-priced incense has long been used in by different cultures in the Americas since the days of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. White Copal is widely used today in the Catholic Church throughout Mexico and its use is growing in the rest of North America given its pleasing scent, low incidence of allergic reactions and reasonable cost.



White Copal incense prior to pulverizing.

Cheaper (or simply just inferior) incense is made from a neutral combustible material such as sawdust that has been treated with a perfumed volatile solvent. While usually inexpensive, such incenses often render smoke that many find harsh and irritating. Such incense should be avoided in liturgical settings not only because of their irritating qualities but because they give all incense an undeservingly bad name.

Incense Paraphernalia and Personnel

Incense smoke is distributed using a device known as a *thurible* or *censer*. The word thurible is derived from the Latin word *thus* which means incense. Typically the thurible consists of a metal vessel which holds burning charcoal embers and incense. One or more chains (typically 3) are attached to this vessel allowing it to be swung, facilitating the distribution of fragrant incense smoke. It is believed that today's thuribles are similar to those used in ancient Judaism although thurible covers (which are still not used in Ambrosian Rite Masses near Milan, Italy) are a convenience/safety feature that date from latter times.

Before spoonfuls (actually tiny shovelfuls) of incense are placed over the hot coals of the thurible, the incense is stored in a vessel known as a “boat” (*navicula* in Latin) based on its appearance. When incense is used in a procession the altar server entrusted with the thurible is known as the *thurifer*. The altar server (often the youngest present) responsible for the boat of incense is traditionally known as the *boat-boy* and now more often known as the *boat-bearer*.

The Multiple Senses of Incensing

Incense use during liturgical celebrations must engage more than our sense of smell. The visual and audible qualities of incensing are also important parts of the liturgical use of incense. This begins with choosing a proper thurible and keeping it clean and highly polished. Thuribles come in different shapes and sizes and they are made from different metals with different finishes but they all have one thing in common – they are immediately identifiable as thuribles. They are never to be confused with the clay flowerpot-inspired pottery monstrosities whose



L-R: Charcoal tongs, thurible, thurible insert, incense boat and charcoal starter vessel.

use often leaves the faithful wondering exactly what’s going on. Nor are they incense stand(s) which would be more at home in an ancient Jewish temple and not a Catholic parish church.

Bishops, priests, deacons and altar servers (thurifers and boat-bearers) all need to understand how to properly use the thurible and the incense boat. This comes through practice and experience initially

gained *outside* of the liturgy. They need to be able to execute their role in the incensing process with a relaxed grace and not a worried state of confusion. The old saying “more incense and less nonsense” is appropriate when considering the process of incensing during liturgies.

Incense should be chosen that emits a distinctive, luxurious cloud of smoke. Few things are more awkward and worthless during liturgies than a smokeless thurible. Visual clouds of smoke need not equate to irritating clouds of smoke! Pure White Copal is one of the best examples of a natural incense that renders a beautiful white smoke while also being very kind to those who are sensitive to incense smoke.

There is the also audible component of using incense. While the chain(s) of the thurible need not necessarily contact the thurible vessel while incensing which results in a distinctive clicking sound, the practice is long held and it has a practical basis. The distinctive click-click-click brings the faithful's sense of hearing into the incensing process. It catches their attention and helps them to focus on the incensing taking place.

Eastern Catholics and Orthodox (and rarely Latin Rite Catholics and Anglicans) take this a step farther by adding small bells to the chains of their thuribles. Their censers have 12 or 13 bells (a silent bell typically represents Judas) attached to their supporting chains to represent the Apostles and are used to focus the faithful's attention on the incensing process. Finally (and most certainly anecdotally) there is also the ancient belief that the sounds made by contacting metal against metal possesses *apotropaic* powers – the belief that metal-to-metal sound is capable of driving away evil spirits.

Why Do We Use Incense?

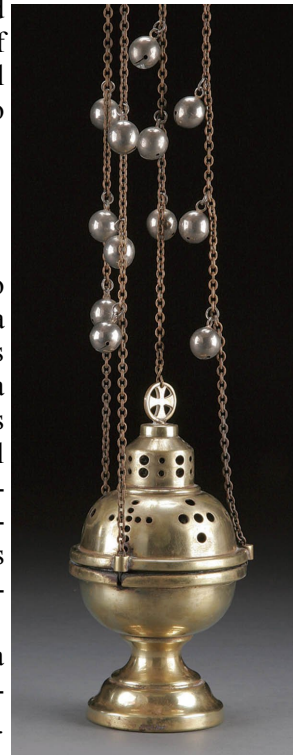
In the Old Testament God commanded His people to burn incense (Exodus 30:7, 40:27, etc.) Incense is a sacramental used to venerate, bless, and sanctify. Its smoke conveys a sense of mystery and awe. It is a reminder of the sweet smelling presence of our Lord. Its use adds a feeling of solemnity to the Mass. The visual imagery of the smoke and the smell reinforce the transcendence of the Mass linking Heaven with Earth, allowing us to enter into the presence of God. It symbolizes the burning zeal of faith which should consume all Christians while the fragrance symbolizes Christian virtue.

Incensing may also be viewed in the context of a “burnt offering” given to God. In the Old Testament animal offerings were partially or wholly consumed by fire. In essence to burn something was to give it to God.

Monsignor Romano Guardini (a scholar who has greatly influenced the writings of Pope Benedict XVI) had these beautiful words to say about the use of incense:

“The offering of an incense is a generous and beautiful rite. The bright grains of incense are laid upon the red-hot charcoal, the censer is swung, and the fragrant smoke rises in clouds. In the rhythm and the sweetness there is a musical quality; and like music also is the entire lack of practical utility: it is a prodigal waste of precious material. It is a pouring out of unwithholding love.”

Incense and the smoke of burning incense have been offered as gifts to God and to others since ancient times. In a more practical visual sense as the fragrant smoke ascends it also symbolizes our prayers rising to Heaven. The 2002 edition



of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) which contains the rubrics for the celebration of the Mass has this to say about the use of incense:

GIRM 75: *The bread and wine are placed on the altar by the priest to the accompaniment of the prescribed formulas. The priest may incense the gifts placed upon the altar and then incense the cross and the altar itself, so as to signify the Church's offering and prayer rising like incense in the sight of God. Next, the priest, because of his sacred ministry, and the people, by reason of their baptismal dignity, may be incensed by the deacon or another minister.*

Monsignor Guardini also had this beautiful thought about the use of incense within the Mass:

"The offering of incense is like Mary's anointing (of Jesus) at Bethany. It is as free and objectless as beauty. It burns and is consumed like love that lasts through death. And the arid soul still takes his stand and asks the same question: What is the good of it?"

It is the offering of a sweet savour which Scripture itself tells us is the prayers of the Saints. Incense is the symbol of prayer. Like pure prayer it has in view no object of its own; it asks nothing for itself. It rises like the Gloria at the end of a psalm in adoration and thanksgiving to God for his great glory."

Incense smoke also purifies all that it touches. This is best illustrated by the rich practice in the Chaldean Rite of the Catholic Church. Those preparing to receive Holy Communion during the Holy Qurbano (Chaldean sacrificial liturgy) first purify their hands by holding them in smoke just above a bowl of burning incense. Similarly in the Maronite Rite of the Catholic Church the chalice, diskos (similar to the paten) and asterisk are all inverted over the burning incense to catch the fragrant smoke as they are being purified prior to liturgical use.

Finally in more practical terms incense has also been used as a means to

mask unpleasant odors before the existence of modern sanitation resources. While this has never been the primary use of incense in the liturgy it certainly is the most widely known. Most have heard of the famed *Botafumeiro* ("smoke expeller" in Galician.) This giant thurible has swung from the ceiling of the *Santiago de Compostela* Cathedral in Spain since the eleventh century. The clouds of smoke not only masked the scent of unwashed pilgrims it was also believed to provide a prophylactic effect that guarded against plagues and other epidemics of eras past.

The fabled *Botafumeiro* thurible on display inside the *Catedral de Santiago* Library.



How is Incense Used in the Mass?

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) provides the following instruction for the use of incense during the celebration of the Ordinary Form of the Mass as follows:

GIRM 277: *The priest, having put incense into the thurible, blesses it with the sign of the Cross, without saying anything.*

Before and after an incensation, a profound bow is made to the person or object that is incensed, except for the incensation of the altar and the offerings for the Sacrifice of the Mass.

The following are incensed with three swings of the thurible: the Most Blessed Sacrament, a relic of the Holy Cross and images of the Lord exposed for public veneration, the offerings for the sacrifice of the Mass, the altar cross, the Book of the Gospels, the Paschal Candle, the priest, and the people.

The following are incensed with two swings of the thurible: relics and images of the Saints exposed for public veneration. This should be done, however, only at the beginning of the celebration, after the incensation of the altar.

The altar is incensed with single swings of the thurible in this way:

- a. If the altar is freestanding with respect to the wall, the priest incenses walking around it;*
- b. If the altar is not freestanding, the priest incenses it while walking first to the right hand side, then to the left.*

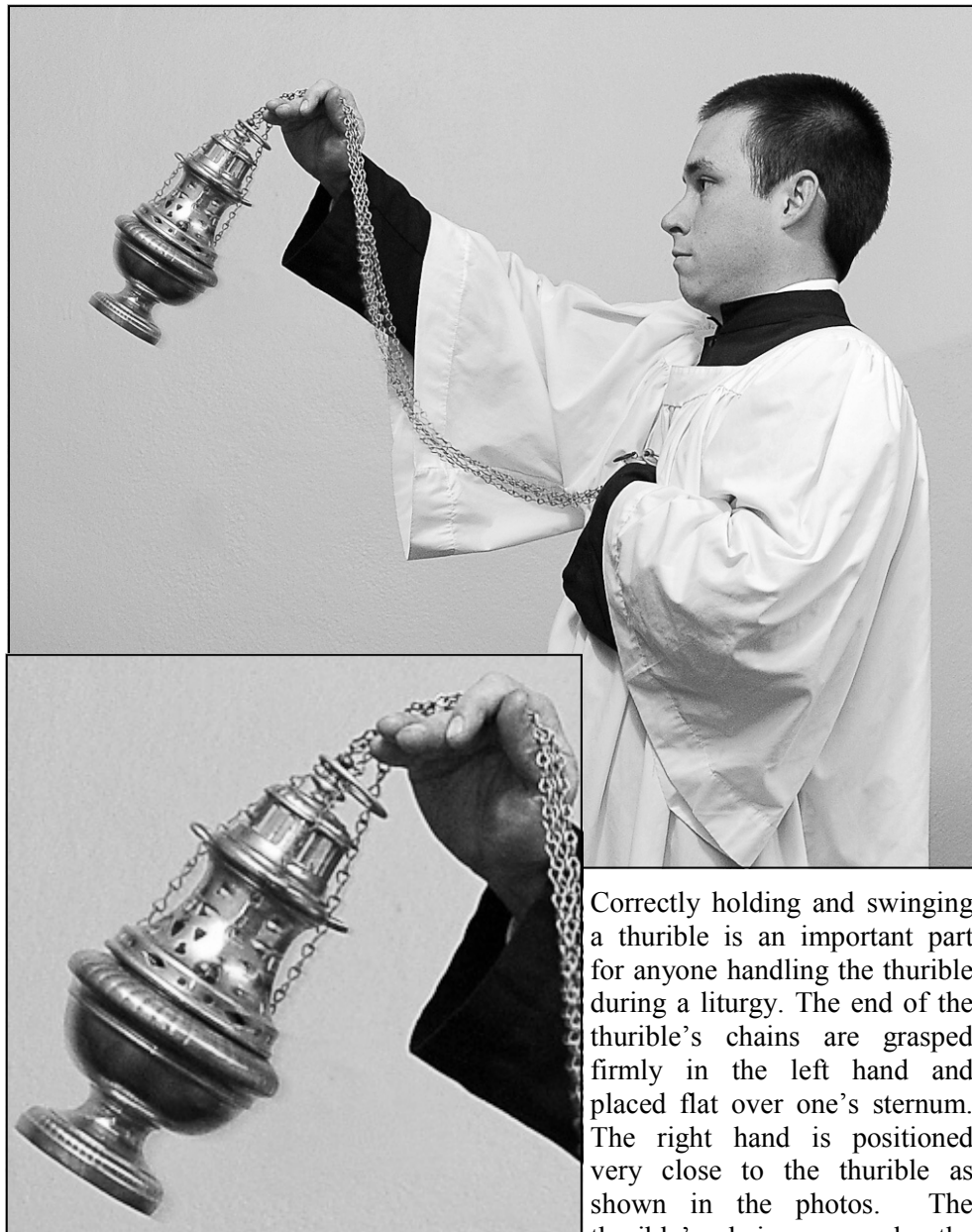
The cross, if situated on or near the altar, is incensed by the priest before he incenses the altar; otherwise, he incenses it when he passes in front of it.



The priest incenses the offerings with three swings of the thurible or by making the sign of the cross over the offerings with the thurible, then going on to incense the cross and the altar.

A deacon incenses the priest during the celebration of the Ordinary Form of the Mass. The use of incense adds great solemnity and beauty to the experience of being present at Calvary.

Correctly Swinging a Thurible



Correctly holding and swinging a thurible is an important part for anyone handling the thurible during a liturgy. The end of the thurible's chains are grasped firmly in the left hand and placed flat over one's sternum. The right hand is positioned very close to the thurible as shown in the photos. The thurible's chain runs under the thurifer's pinkie, ring and middle fingers. It runs under the index finger and then over the top of the thumb. Other methods simply don't give the level of control necessary for properly manipulating a thurible.

Photograph courtesy of the Romanitas Press

Where is Incense Used in the Mass?

Similarly the GIRM 276 allows for the use of incense at the followings times during the celebration of the Ordinary Form (OF) of the Mass:

GIRM 276. *Thurification or incensation is an expression of reverence and of prayer, as is signified in Sacred Scripture (cf. Ps 141 [140]:2, Rev 8:3).*

Incense may be used if desired in any form of Mass:

- 1.) *During the entrance procession;*
- 2.) *At the beginning of Mass to incense the cross and the altar;*
- 3.) *At the Gospel procession and during the proclamation of the Gospel itself;*
- 4.) *At the offertory once the sacred vessels and gifts of bread and wine have been placed upon the altar. The offerings, Crucifix, Paschal Candle and the altar as well as the priest, all other clergy and laypersons in attendance are also incensed;*
- 5.) *At the elevations of the Sacred Host and the chalice of Precious Blood following the consecration;*

Incense is also commonly and licitly used during the recessional of the Mass.

There are actually more opportunities use incense in the OF Mass than the older Extraordinary Form of the Mass. Incense use is not allowed during the celebration of the Low EF Mass as it was originally intended to only be privately celebrated in apsidal chapels. The OF Mass has no such restrictions yet incense use is surprisingly far rarer than in solemn celebrations of the EF Mass.

During funeral Masses the earthly remains of the decedent or the *catafalque* may be incensed as a blessing for the remission of temporal punishment and as a sign of respect. The grave site may also be incensed as outlined in the *Collectio Rituum*.

Five grains of encapsulated incense (most often red incense made to look like nails) are embedded in the paschal candle at the Easter Vigil. These five grains of incense represent the five wounds of Jesus Christ – one in each hand, one in each foot, and the spear thrust into His side.

Five red grains of encapsulated incense (incense encased in wax inside of a metal shell) have been embedded into this paschal candle. This ritual takes place at the beginning of the Easter Vigil Mass, in this case in AD 2005. The paschal candle symbolizes Christ as light of the world and His presence in the midst of His people. The five grains of incense represent the five nails used to crucify Him.



Incense and the Extraordinary Form

The use of incense during the celebration of the Extraordinary Form (EF) of the Mass depends on the type of Mass being celebrated. No incense is used in the daily celebration of the *Missa Lecta* or Low Mass. Incense is used at the *Missa Cantata*, *Missa Solemnis* and the *Pontifical Missa Solemnis*.

The rubrics for the EF Mass specify the use of incense at: the beginning of Mass to incense the altar and the celebrant; just prior to the proclamation of the Gospel to incense the *Evangelary* or Book of Gospels; at the offertory to incense the gifts and once again the altar, the celebrant, other celebrating clerics and those in choir plus the laity; and during the elevations of the Sacred Host and the chalice of Precious Blood. In some locations the thurifer may also lead the procession and recession at the beginning and end of Mass depending on local custom.

The incensing instructions (*Ordo Incensandi Oblata/Altaris*) for the offertory of the EF Mass are illustrated in remarkable detail in the *Missale Romanum* (see following graphics.) The offered host(s) and chalice of wine are first incensed with three crosses comprised of six linear movements of the thurible. The offerings are then incensed again using three circular motions of the thurible. The instructions for incensing the altar and crucifix are even more detailed. If the altar is attached to the back wall of the sanctuary a total of 29 swings of the thurible are necessary. If the altar is freestanding, a total of 22 swings of incense are required.

The beauty of the prayers recited by the priest during the celebration of the OF Mass underscore incense's role as an offering to God and are worthy of mention. At the incensing of the crucifix, the first class relics of saints and the altar at the beginning of Mass the celebrant prays:

"Thou art blessed A by Him, in Whose honor, thou shalt burn."

At the offertory the celebrant prays the following prayer as the boat of incense is offered to him:

"May the Lord, by the intercession of blessed Michael the Archangel, standing at the right hand of the Altar of Incense, and of all His elect, vouchsafe to bless A this incense and receive it as an odor of sweetness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

As he incenses the offerings of bread and wine he prays:

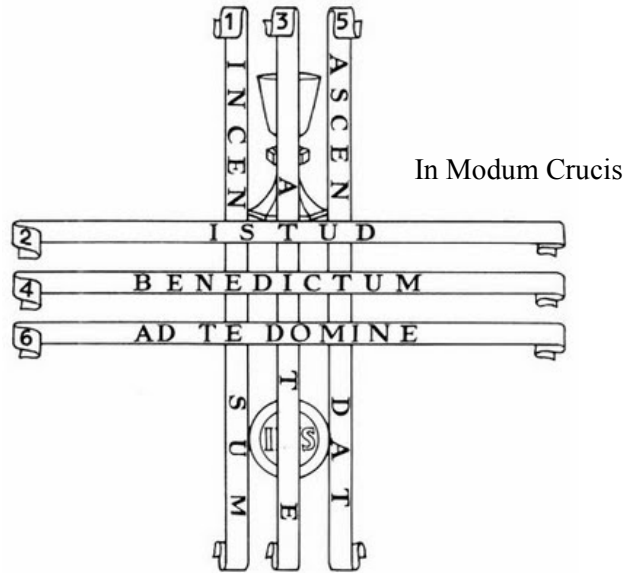
"May this incense which Thou hast blest, O Lord, ascend to Thee, and may Thy mercy descend upon us."

Let my prayer, O Lord, like incense before You; the lifting up of my hands, like the evening sacrifice. O Lord, set a watch before my mouth, a guard at the door of my lips. Let not my heart incline to the evil of engaging in deeds of wickedness."

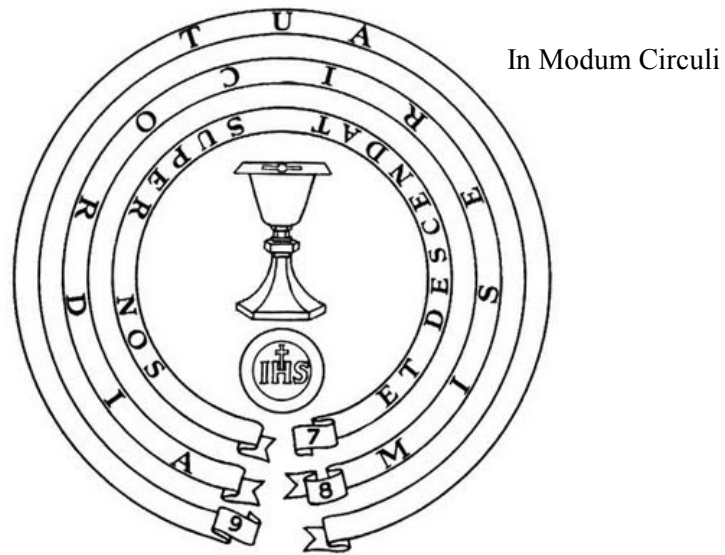
May the Lord enkindle in us the fire of His love and the flame of everlasting charity. Amen."

Ordo Insensandi Oblata

Iuxta Rubricas Missalis Romani

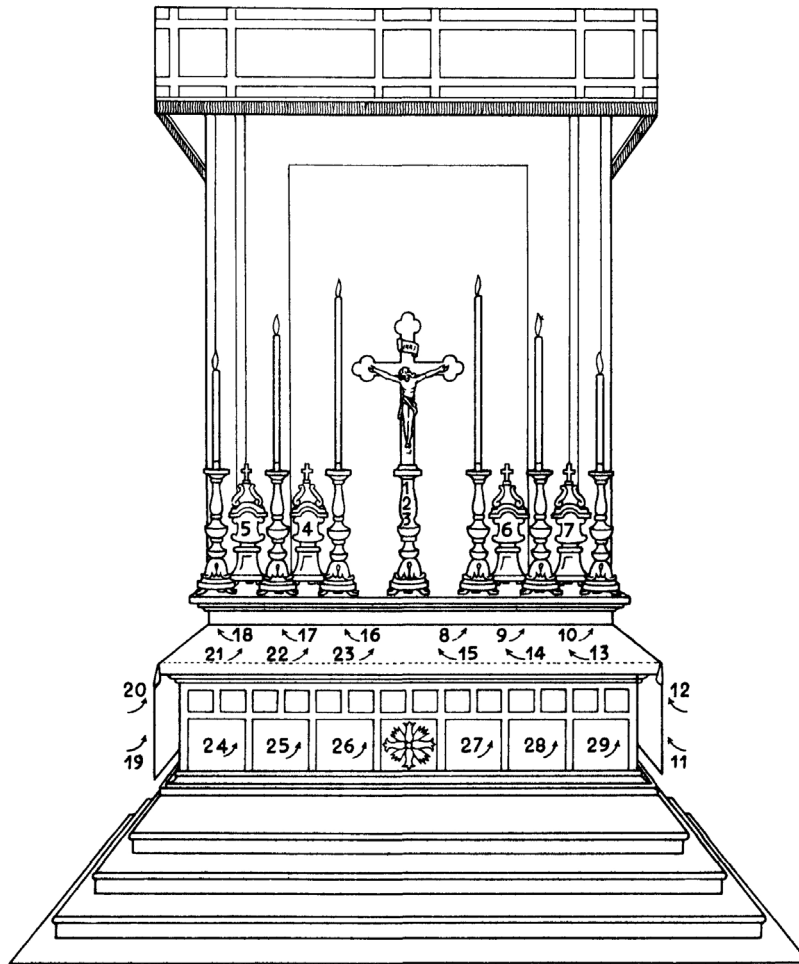


1. Incensum	4. Benedictum	7. Et Descendat Super Nos
2. Istud	5. Ascendat	8. Misericordia
3. A Te	6. Ad Te, Domine	9. Tua



Ordo Incensationis Altaris

Iuxta Rubricas Missalis Romani



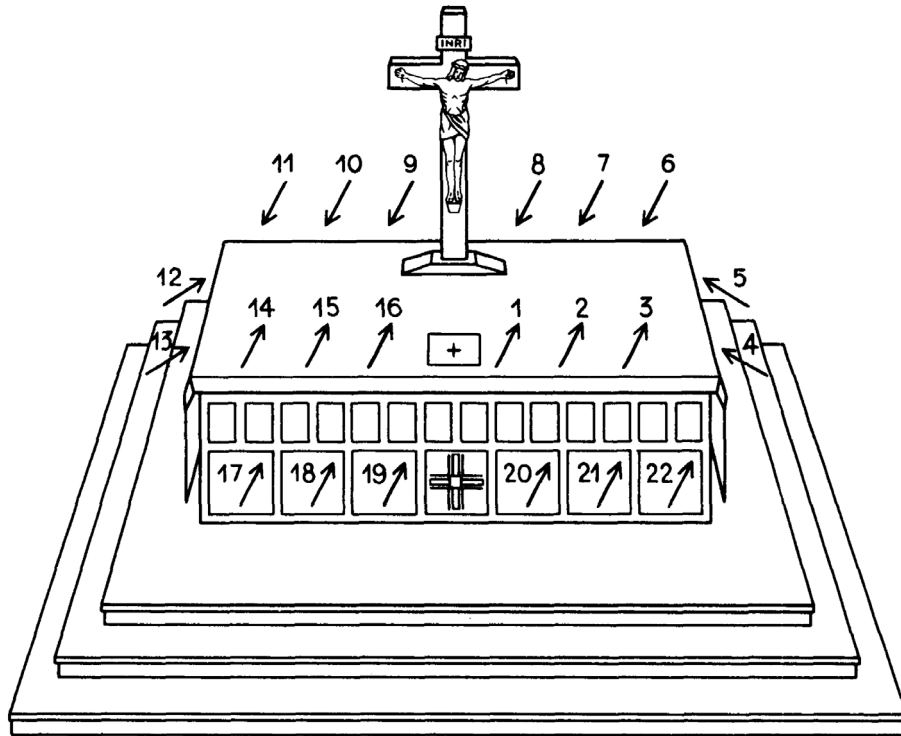
Si in altari non adsunt reliquiae seu imagines Sanctorum, omittitur earum incensatio, Quae indicator sun nn. 4,5,6,7 (Ritus servandus, IV, 5) et statim, incensa cruce (nn. 1,2,3), proceditur ad incensandum altare per ordinem 8,9, etc. ad 29.



If there are no relics or images (e.g. small statues) of saints upon the altar, omit their incensation as indicated under numbers 4, 5, 6, 7 [Rite of offering (rubric section of missal that describes celebrant's actions...)] and immediately proceed to incense the cross and altar per the rules 8, 9, etc. to 29.

Ordo Incensationis Altaris

Quod Commode Circuiiri Potest



Praemissa cruces (et reliquiarum seu imaginum) incensatione, fiunt 22 ductus, quorum nn. 1-2 et 14-16 *supra mensam* altaris, nn. Autem 4-13 et 17-22 *infra et ex latere*.



As previously mentioned, having incensed the cross (and relics or images), make 22 swings, of which nn. 1-2 and 14-16 are over the mensa of the altar, however Those that follow, nn. 4-13 and 17-22, are at the side.



General Instruction of The Roman Missal #299: “The altar should be built apart from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it easily...”

In other words if a freestanding altar is employed (it is not a requirement)

it must be placed in the sanctuary in such a way as to allow easy circumambulation which is required for proper incensing. If 4 reliquaries or small statues were placed on the freestanding altar (as shown in the pervious illustration) a total of 29 swings of the thurible (including 3 for the crucifix) would be required.

Incense Use in the Divine Liturgy

When talking about incense it's edifying to discuss how Eastern Catholic and Orthodox churches use copious amounts of incense in their own sacrificial liturgies. The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom dates from the 5th century AD and is the most commonly celebrated Divine Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite of the Catholic Church.

Incense is used several times in the *Prothesis* or Liturgy of Preparation and the Divine Liturgy itself. After the deacon puts incense into the thurible he asks the priest to bless the now-burning incense. The priestly celebrant responds with this beautiful prayer:

“We offer incense to you, O Christ our God, as an aroma of spiritual fragrance, Having received it on your heavenly altar, send down upon us in return the grace of your Most Holy Spirit.”

The priest begins by incensing the *asterisk* (star) and placing it over the holy bread held in the *diskos*. He then incenses two veils – one which he uses to cover the holy bread the other to cover the holy chalice which has been filled with wine. A third, larger veil known as the *aer* is then incensed and used to cover both the holy bread and the chalice. The deacon then incenses the prepared offerings once more and the holy table on all four sides while praying:

“When your body was in the tomb, and your soul in Hades, when you were in paradise with the thief, you were at the same time, O Christ, as God upon your throne with the Father and the Spirit, infinite and filling all things.”

The deacon then continues to incense the apsidal icon, the icons of the *iconostasis*, the interior of the church and the faithful as he quietly prays Psalm 50. Later the thurible is carried as part of the Little Entrance. During the singing of the Alleluia, the deacon incenses the Holy Book of Gospels sitting upon the holy table by again incensing the holy table on all four sides. He then incenses the faithful once more and the front of the holy table one final time.

During the Prayer of the *Cherubikon*, the deacon once again incenses the: apsidal icon, the icons of the *iconostasis*, the interior of the church and the faithful. During the Great Entrance the thurible is carried in procession by an altar server. At the end of the procession the *diskos* and the chalice bearing gifts are placed on



A Byzantine Catholic deacon incenses the faithful after incensing the icons of the iconostasis and the church interior.

the hold table. The large veil (the aer) and two small veils are removed. The priest incenses the *aer* once more and uses it to cover the diskos and chalice (sans the small veils) upon the holy table. Once covered the priest incenses the gifts three final times while praying:

“In your goodness, O Lord, show us favor to Zion; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Then you will be pleased with lawful sacrifice, burnt offerings wholly consumed; then you will be offered young bulls on your altar.” rf. Psalm 50:20-21

Following the distribution of Holy Communion the priestly celebrant places the holy chalice back upon the holy table, veils it once more with one of the small veils and incenses them three times quietly saying:

“Be exalted above the heavens, O God, and let your glory be over all the earth.”

During the singing of the final Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! The priest takes the holy chalice to the table of preparation where the deacon incenses them one final time. As you can see, a great quantity of incense is joyfully and poignantly offered during the celebration of the Byzantine Liturgy of Preparation and the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom.

Incense Use Outside of the Mass

Incense is used by the Church in many areas outside of the Mass. Near the end of the 4th Century AD, the Pilgrim Etheria (Silvia) witnessed use of incense at the vigil *Office of the Sunday* in Jerusalem. Many individuals today (both clerical and lay) include the burning of incense as part of their praying of the *Liturgy of the Hours* or during private prayers of their own formulation.

The *Ordo Romanus VI* documents the use of incense during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament to at least the 14th Century AD. Incense is also used in various solemn processions, graveside services, the blessing of the dedication of new churches, cemeteries and items such as: new altars, new church bells, new sacred vessels and newly acquired copies of the Book of Gospels. Incense is used in the rite of consecrating of the chrism and the blessing of other holy oils, during



the singing of the Gospel canticle at solemn Morning and Evening Prayers of the Divine Office.

Twinthurifers following the crucifer and flanking lucifers process just ahead of the exposed Most Blessed Sacrament underneath the processional canopy on the feast of Corpus Christi.

Grains of incense are placed into the sepulcher of newly consecrated altars along with the relics of saints to represent the burial rite of the ancient martyrs and to symbolize the prayers of the saint to whom the relic belongs. Incense is burned atop new altars as they are undergoing the process of consecration prior to their first use. Finally, frankincense and myrrh is often blessed at the Mass of the Feast of the Epiphany to commemorate the visitation of the Biblical Magi to the Baby Jesus. This incense is distributed to attendees for use at their own family altars and to reserve for use at the coming Easter to prepare their home paschal candles.

Health and Safety

Maintaining good respiratory health is a valid concern of everyone living in today's world. Unfortunately even the remote possibility of incense use leading to cancer and other respiratory illness is used as license by some to eliminate all uses of incense from all liturgies. That is tragic given the available body of information on the positive safety record of incense use in Catholic worship.

There is no argument that the direct-burning of some types of incense creates smoke that contains cancer-causing carcinogens. That does not however mean that everyone who inhales incense smoke will develop cancer or any respiratory illness based on their exposure. *The fact is that as of this writing, no scientific study has ever linked the use of incense in Catholic Christian worship settings with an increase in cancer or other respiratory disease.*

Scientific studies have however concluded that the extremely heavy use of incense in other forms of religious worship has led to higher incidences of cancer. For example some Thai Buddhist Monks do expose themselves to a higher threat of cancer based on incense use within their own worship. A direct comparison is impossible however. The amount and type of incense used in Buddhist worship is vastly different from that used in Catholic Christian worship. So is the long lengths of time some Buddhist monks and support personnel spend exposed to incense smoke. The physical posture of Buddhist clerics in relation to the incense smoke and their corresponding exposure level is also quite different than that of a Catholic cleric. Buddhist temples also intentionally concentrate the density of incense smoke by architectural design which is not typically true of Catholic Christian worship spaces.



Pope Benedict XVI prepares to incense the Blessed Sacrament on exposition in St. Peter's Basilica.

Some are also concerned about the psychoactivity of *icensole acetate*, a component of frankincense. Researchers from Johns Hopkins and Hebrew Universities have learned that administering *icensole acetate* to lab mice has a positive effect on areas of their brains that effect anxiety and depression. The effect on humans is not known but the findings do indicate possible new directions for developing medications to treat these two conditions. While the concentration of *icensole acetate* were much higher than one would experience at Mass from incense smoke, it's nice to know that frankincense might one day help to reduce the most common causes of psychiatric disability in the USA. On the other hand concerns or claims about being put under the influence of a psychoactive drug when incense is used really don't pass the smell test so to speak.

Finally there is the matter of fire safety and fire sprinklers. Fire safety should be taken seriously by properly training those involved with the proper preparation and extinguishing of incense and charcoal embers. They should also be trained to properly clean and store the incense paraphernalia. Sadly the existence of fire sprinklers is also treated as license by some to eliminate all incense use. Fire sprinkler systems for Catholic churches must be designed (or re-designed) to allow the use of incense. Most existing systems will allow the use of incense (even copious amounts of incense) – including those systems that some claim will be triggered by the tiniest hint of incense smoke. Working closely with one's alarm system contractor will render an alarm system that allows the prudent use of incense (with plenty of margin for error) while also correctly functioning as an effective smoke alarm.

Mental and Physical Comfort

All too often the knee-jerk response to complaints about the liturgical use of incense is to completely remove it from the celebration of the Mass. While the rubrics for the Ordinary Form of the Mass don't require incense to be used, choosing to banish it altogether is an action that strips solemnity and historical continuity away from the Mass. There are far more positive ways of dealing with sensitivities to incense smoke.

The first step should be to catechize the faithful on the importance of incense and why incense has historically been part of the Mass. Most Catholics' understanding of incense seems to stop at the ability of incense to mask unpleasant odors. All too often people complain about the use of incense simply because they don't like the smell or because using it extends the Mass for a few minutes. A little education will often sooth their discomfort.

Next is to choose a type of incense that will be the least irritating to sensitive individuals. One must be certain to choose an all-natural, pure resin or oleoresin incense. White Copal is one example of a mild, all-natural pure resin incense that is very reasonably priced. The stronger frankincense and myrrh incenses are also good choices. One must however be careful to choose a brand and that uses hypoallergenic essential oils in the blending process.

Some of the very best blends are offered for sale by Catholic religious orders and societies. Their recipes are closely guarded secrets that have been refined over many centuries by the diligent toil of monks and friars across the world. Most offer specific blends for different liturgies throughout the year including special blends for Advent, Christmas and Easter. Some offer blends advertised as being hypoallergenic. When a former



Archbishop Timothy Dolan displays excellent technique as he incenses the main crucifix inside Saint Patrick's Cathedral in NYC during his Mass of Installation as Archbishop of New York.

Queen of England suffered from allergies brought on by incense smoke, a special blend was compounded just for her and it is commercially available today.

There must also be sensitivity to the fact that some blends – even those of high quality incense simply do not smell good to some people. This sensitivity seems particularly true in the Western World. Courteous feedback outside of the Mass should be encouraged and records kept of which blends are favored by the congregation and not simply a few individuals. Incense made from sawdust and potpourri seasoned with perfumed volatile solvents must be avoided even if it means going without incense, which should never be the case with proper planning. Also to be avoided is replacing proper liturgical incensing with smudging rituals from non-Christian traditions. The combustible matter (often sage or cedar) can be very harsh and irritating to just about everyone present.

The type of charcoal used is also very important. Ideally pure charcoal initially lit by a gas or electric source should be used. Charcoal made specifically for use with incense contains uncompressed gunpowder as an accelerant and that can be irritating to some sensitive people. Convenience has led to problems in this area.

Even more important is keeping the thurible clean. It's very common to see thuribles that are clean (or at least semi-clean) on the outside while their insides are filthy. Line the interior (some are removable) of the thurible with tinfoil or a tinfoil cupcake liner. When the use is complete the tinfoil can be easily removed along with the ashes, embers and semi-burned incense. Keep the inside top of the thurible clean as well using alcohol, lacquer thinner or contact cleaner. When the inside top of a thurible is filthy it will emit foul smelling, irritating smoke once heat from the charcoal begins to melt and eventually burn the deposited resin.

When a thurible has been prepared for use with burning charcoal, make sure to keep the top of the thurible elevated several inches above the base to help keep the inside of the top as clean as possible.

Incensing must also be done with great care. At some celebrations of the Mass it may not be prudent to use incense at every point in the Mass that's allowed by the rubrics. Incense need not be used in all six places allowed by the rubrics of the Ordinary Form of the Mass – it may be used at select places. Choose where to incense with others in mind. Thurifers should refrain from “Queen Annes” (360 degree swings of the thurible) which emit too much smoke when sensitive people are in attendance. In some cases it's possible to keep the thurible in a separate room during the liturgy when it is not being used. Incensing must also be done with proper equipment and technique. The “flaming flower-pot” and other lamentable incensing techniques typically emit far too much smoke and are a horror to behold.

In still other cases it would be appropriate to note in parish bulletins at which Masses incense will be used. Sensitive individuals can then plan to either sit near the rear of the church, perhaps bring a bottle of water from which to sip or ask their doctors about medication like *Diphenhydramine* (sold under the brand name



A Dominican priest assisted by a deacon and two acolytes charge a thurible with incense prior to use during a Requiem Mass. Courtesy: Fr. Lawrence Lew, O.P.

Benedryl and others) -- a powerful solution to those sensitive to incense smoke or they can choose to attend another Mass where incense will not be used.

It's interesting to watch the reaction of someone who has complained about the use of incense at the first sight of incense. They often begin coughing just as soon as they see the charcoal being lit – long before it would be physically possible for them to smell any of the actual smoke. (In one experiment harmless carbon dioxide fog generated by filling a thurible with dry ice and water still triggered coughs.) The faked coughs are usually nothing more than protests aimed at eliminating the use of all incense. The coughing typically ceases once and for all when the historical and liturgical significance of incense is patiently explained to them along with the resolute decision to use incense at least at more solemn liturgies (which doesn't have to mean only Christmas, Easter and Requiem Masses.)

There is also a technical, medical reason for the love or hate relationship some have with incense. Olfactory receptors lock odors such as incense smoke into memory in the brain's limbic system. These scents are stored with associated



Dominican priest incenses a decedent's earthly remains after sprinkling it with holy water during the celebration of a Requiem Mass. It's fascinating how reverent practices like the use of holy water and incense are so often eschewed until someone passes. Then most seem to really embrace the old "bells and smells." Let's hope the use of both become far more common once more.

memories of mood and emotion. Many years later these memories can instantly be recalled when the aroma is detected again. Most people have experienced a scent triggering a memory – often in fantastic detail. This is one reason why some people love the smell of incense – they associate it with something positive like Christmas or Easter Mass while growing-up at their local cathedral. Others associate the smell of incense with something negative like the funeral of a loved one or the driving desire as a child for Mass to end so they could finally eat breakfast or unwrap Christmas presents.

In the end some people simply need to give incense a chance. They need to actually understand the purpose of its use in sacrificial liturgies. They need to drop their preconceived notions that the use of incense is intrinsically bad and their desires/needs to exert their personal influence and control on the liturgy. In other words they need to put the worship of God ahead of themselves. Giving in to their demands to remove incense from the Mass while expeditious and easy should not be accommodated given the long list of measures that can be taken to reduce or eliminate their discomfort.

Summary

The Catholic Christian faith is a liturgical faith. It makes use of all five of our senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. This is certainly by design as each sense aids us in availing ourselves to the salvific grace flowing from the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. This is precisely why every effort should be used to employ all of our senses whenever possible during the celebration of the sacred liturgy. In more concise terms, the “smells and bells” most certainly do matter.

It’s a shame that incense use has been banned in many parishes and treated like a toxic nuisance in so many others. Sensitivity to incense smoke (real or imagined) and the associated control issues no doubt play a large part in stripping the use of incense from the Mass. There does however seem to be even bigger culprits at work.

First, some simply do not want to take the time and make the effort to prepare and use incense. Second, some seem unwilling to do anything that will extend the length of the Mass by even a few minutes. Both conditions are tragic and deserve resolution. There have also been efforts by some over the past few decades to discard more and more of the liturgical treasures that make the celebration of the Mass so beautiful, so full of mystery, so compelling and so attractive to those seeking a deeper experience of worship. This too requires attention.

In some cases this began as sincere efforts to “focus on God” by attempting to simplify the celebration of the Mass. In other cases priestly celebrants have erroneously been taught to equate incense to a useless medieval practice that interrupts the flow of the liturgy. They have been taught that incensing places too much emphasis on the Blessed Sacrament as something to be adored rather than received when both acts are crucially important. Sadly no matter what the inspiration, the end result typically devolves into liturgical minimalism and banality.

In addition these attempts at stripping the Mass of its external beauty and mystery have often come at great individual effort over a prolonged period. This explains the zeal of the originators to keep things just as they are. Their canned response to criticisms of this modern day form of iconoclasm has been to point out that the validity of the Mass is not contingent on these external treasures and that their absence will not hinder the faithful from realizing the grace stemming from the Mass. That's quite true. However while the efficacy of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is dependent neither on the worthiness of the celebrant nor others in attendance *one must be present at this miraculous event to share in its graces. One must also be open to receiving the sacrificial grace that flows from this miraculous event.* Stripping the Mass of solemn external elements like the use of incense (and a great many others) has caused a growing number to question the sacred nature of the Mass. In other words they wonder how can such a magnificent gift from God (the Mass) be treated in such a cavalier and utilitarian manner if it truly is what we believe it to be?



Russian Orthodox deacons prepare a pair of censers prior to a Crucession.

Fewer of the faithful attending fewer Masses equates to fewer of the faithful availing themselves to the salvific grace that flows from the Mass on fewer occasions. This and the increase in unfulfilled Mass obligations can potentially result in fewer souls in Heaven. While only God determines which souls are ultimately saved or lost, one must wonder if the potential ramification of eternal loss is even considered before treasures like incense are stripped from the celebration of the Mass?

Catholic Christians should do anything they can to stem and prayerfully reverse this trend – including preserving treasures like using more incense at more Masses. We need to help our Catholic Christian brethren to understand its ancient history and purpose in the sacred liturgy. In other words the “smells and bells” most certainly do matter and more people need to understand that fact. As the old maxim says *lex orandi lex credendi!* (the law of prayer is the law of belief!)

Nota Bene

The Proper Formation of a Thurifer

The focus of this work has been to look at the history and the reasons behind the ecclesiastical use of incense. It's also important to mention a few words about how to choose and form would-be thurifers.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that a person assumes the responsibility of becoming a thurifer in order to serve God by serving the celebrant of the liturgy. They do not become thurifers in order to serve themselves, their parents or anyone else. Choosing a thurifer (or any altar server for that matter) is not about "giving everyone a chance." It's about choosing and preparing the person who will best be able to lend to the magnificence of the Mass.

A person must be chosen not only because they have an aptitude for becoming a thurifer but because they have a genuine interest in the tradition and function of the ministry. Their formation must include both catechesis and praxis. It should begin by spending some time as both a boat-bearer and as a general altar server before taking on the responsibility of becoming a thurifer. They also need to understand the long history and different nuances of the ministry.

Mass is not the place to practice being a thurifer! The celebration of too many Masses have been negatively impacted because those serving at the altar were not properly prepared to handle the responsibility. Time must be set aside outside of the Mass to practice the duties of the thurifer.

The thurifer is very visible at liturgies. That means they need to dress in a manner that shows great respect for the liturgy, for those in attendance and most especially for God. In essence *it does matter* what thurifers wear. If they are unwilling to dress in a dignified (*dignified* not expensive) manner they should likely consider lending their talents to a less visible ministry as it would be wrong for them to serve in a manner that would be detrimental to the Mass.

Thurifers lead both the procession and recession. That means they need to walk with dignity and grace in the center of the aisle as they set the pace for everyone else. They need to swing the thurible smoothly and with purpose, with the cover slightly raised (to allow adequate airflow) while never allowing the thurible to go beyond the horizontal. They need to take the proper precautions when turning a corner and they need to stop swinging the thurible as they ascend or descend from stairs. When a thurifer is not in motion they should hold the thurible still with the cover slightly raised to ensure it does not stick while helping to keep the coals glowing and ready for the addition of incense.

Perhaps most important a thurifer needs to be an true ambassador when it comes to showing the faithful how the use of incense can add reverence and mystery to the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. If they serve their ministry with skill and dedication they are in a position to help more people enjoy the use of incense at Mass. The reverse is also true. If they serve as thurifers without conviction they are apt to give incense use an undeservedly bad name.

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holy Smoke

THE USE OF INCENSE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Most Catholic Christians are at least vaguely familiar with the use of incense during the celebration of different liturgies. Most love it while some hate it. This short monograph explores the history, science and current use (and disuse) of incense in the Catholic Church.



Dominican deacon swings a thurible containing burning incense as the priestly celebrant of the Mass elevates the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Photograph courtesy of Rev. Lawrence Lew, O.P.