

The Altar is Incensed

This is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.

Holy Smoke! What is all that incense about? The reaction is rather mixed when it comes to incense. Some love it, and some love to hate it. But the bottom line about incense is that it is a symbol of prayer. As the incense gently rises it images our prayers going up to God (cf Ps 141:2 quoted below). As the incense slowly settles in is a fragrant symbol for God's graces. And don't fan that incense away! Take a breath! It is holy smoke. Like holy water that literally showers a blessing on us, so too does the fragrant incense, blessed by the priest bring us God's blessings as we breathe it in. Perhaps it is a blessing best received in moderation but it is a blessing.

So here at the beginning of the Mass the priest may incense the Altar. We do not use incense at all Masses, as we shall see below, but it is used for more special occasions. The altar is incensed by the celebrant, the priest, circling the altar and swinging a smoking censor of fragrant incense. In addition to the altar, the Crucifix near the altar is also incensed at this time.

Why do we use incense? What is the history of this action and what is our intention?

In the first place, the use of Incense is another way of showing prayerful reverence. Here at the beginning of Mass we incense the altar, which, as we have seen is a symbol for Christ. It is also a holy place where on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass will take place. Thirdly the relics of the saint within the altar stone represent the Church triumphant and we honor the presence of the saints in incensing the altar. That the crucifix near the altar is incensed is a sign of its special dignity as well, for it bears the image of Christ crucified, and is the sign and image of our salvation. Hence we honor it as well.

The use of incense does not take place at every Mass, as we have already noted. It is an option, and although it may be used at the discretion of the celebrant, it tends to be reserved to special occasions and to more significant feasts of the Church. The General Instruction indicates it is to be used "when the occasion warrants it." In the old Latin Mass the use of incense was restricted to solemn and sung Masses. Today there are few restrictions on its use but ironically it is seen less often.



So, the use of incense tends to be oriented to a heightening of the solemnity. As with so many externals: vestments, flowers, music, and the like, there is intended an aid to the senses in grasping the greatness of the feast.

The use of Incense lends itself especially to religious symbolism, especially as an image for prayer. Such imagery is used in the 141st psalm which says: *Let my prayers rise like incense before you O Lord* (Psalm 141:2). Revelation 8:4 also says: *“The smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended before God from the hand of the Angel.”* It is therefore a sign of our prayers rising to God and His blessings descending upon us. The incensing prayer to be recited by the priest at the incensing of the gifts that was recited by the priest in the Extraordinary Form of the Latin Mass beautifully describes this image: *“May this incense, blessed by You, ascend to You O Lord, and many your mercy descend upon us.”*

In addition, the burning of incense symbolizes the burning zeal which should consume the Christian, and the sweet fragrant odor is the fragrance of Christian virtue. Here too the prayers of the priest in the older Latin Mass described this. The priest says as he hands the thurible to the Deacon at the Offertory: *May the Lord enkindle in us the fire of His love, and the flame of everlasting charity. Amen.*

History of Incense - The use of incense in the culture of the early Church was common in wealthier homes as its perfume was in demand. It was a strong part of burial traditions and it was a major component in both the Jewish Temple and in pagan worship.

It was probably its connection with pagan worship that limited its use in early Church. However, with the virtual disappearance of paganism after the 4th century, incense found its way gradually into the Liturgy, being carried especially in processions.

By the 9th century incense was in use, at least at the beginning of the Mass, and, by the 11th Century, there is explicit mention of the incensing of the altar.

During the Middle Ages the use of incense at other points during the Mass was introduced. Likewise the objects of incense became more numerous. Now persons, relics, and the oblations were incensed as well as the altar. The Latin Missal from the 16th Century prescribed that, when incensed was used, it was to be used at the following times:

1. The altar, cross, and celebrant are incensed at the beginning.
2. The Gospel is incensed just prior to its being sung.
3. At the offertory, the gifts of bread and wine, the altar, the cross, the priest, the deacon, subdeacon, choir, and the assembly are all incensed in this order.
4. The host and chalice after each consecration are incensed as they are held aloft.

Today, this “schedule” of incensations is retained with the exception of the incensation of the celebrant at the beginning. This is now done only at the offertory.

Have you noticed that YOU are also incensed? This takes place at the offertory and is recognition of your dignity and the honor due to you. You are an invited guest to the Mass, God himself has invited you. You are created and redeemed by God, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. All this makes you holy, and honor is due to you on account of it. Thus at the offertory, you are invited to stand and the Deacon or thurifer bestows on you the blessed incense which honors your dignity.

After incensing the altar at the beginning of the Mass, the celebrant goes immediately to the chair.