

The Catholic Company presents

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Bite-Sized Faith

Why do priests burn incense at Mass and Adoration?

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Love the scent or hate it, incense is a valuable part of Catholic worship. So why do Catholics use it so often?

We derive our use of incense from Scripture. Psalm 141:2 reads, “Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering.” Also, in Revelation, John describes incense as a symbol of the prayers of the saints in heaven.

Incense has long been a part of Judeo-Christian worship. In the Old Testament, incense was used for worship, and Catholics used incense even in the early Church.

We use incense in the Mass and at Adoration to symbolize our prayers rising to heaven, and how the grace of the Mass purifies and sanctifies us. Also, when the burning incense rises into the air, representing our prayers going to heaven, we’re reminded of the spiritual connection as earth and heaven meet in the sacrifice of the Mass.

Incense is required for Benediction and may be used at certain points in the Mass, including during the entrance procession, at the proclamation of the Gospel, at the offertory, and at the consecration. Priests may also burn incense at funerals around the coffin to represent our prayers to heaven for the deceased person, and also to commemorate that this person’s body was holy as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Incense powerfully represents what really happens at the Mass, Adoration, and Benediction. The next time you see incense in Church, think about how in this moment, your prayers are rising to God and He is descending to earth to make His presence real before you in the Eucharist.