

# Incense

"And I saw an angel come and stand before the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given to him much incense, and the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended up before God from the hand of the angel." So writes Saint John in the mysterious book of the Apocalypse.

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.

"When the Lord was at supper Mary brought the muskroot of great price and poured it over his feet and wiped them with her hair, and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment." Narrower spirits objected. "Whereto this waste?" But the Son of God has spoken, "Let her alone. She hath done it against my burial." Mary's anointing was a mystery of death and love and the sweet savor of sacrifice.

The offering of incense is like Mary's anointing 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 asks the same question: What is the good of it?

It is the offering of a sweet odor 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.

It is true that symbolism of this sort may lead to mere aestheticism. There are imaginations in which the fragrant clouds of incense induce a spurious religiosity; and, in such instances, when it does so, the Christian conscience does right to protest that prayer should be made in spirit and in truth. But though prayer is a plain, straight-forward business, it is not the so-much-for-so-muchness which the mean imagination and fleshless heart of the religious Philistine would make of it. The same spirit persists that produced the objection of Judas of Kerioth. Prayer is not to be measured by its bargaining power; it is not a matter of materialistic common sense.

Minds of this order know nothing of that generous prayer that seeks only to give. Prayer is a profound act of worship, that asks neither why nor wherefore. It rises like beauty, like sweetness, like love. The more there is in it of love, the more of sacrifice. And when the fire has wholly consumed the sacrifice, a sweet smoke ascends.