

THE USE OF INCENSE IN THE MASS

Sicut incensum dirigatur oratio mea in conspectu tuo –

“May my prayer rise like incense before your face, O Lord” (Psalm 141).



Incense has been used in Divine Worship from time immemorial. In the Book of Exodus, Chapter 30, we hear about the Divine Command to burn incense upon the Altar in the Sanctuary. Due to its pleasing odor, incense is seen as a pleasing offering to God. Furthermore, the smoke rises in imitation of the direction of our prayers, which are to rise to the Face of God as a fragrant offering of praise. One of the gifts brought to the infant Jesus by the Magi was that of Frankincense – a gift befitting a God. The early Church recognized that our earthly celebration of the Mass was a sharing in the eternal liturgy of heaven and so surrounded our sacred mysteries with the sweet sight and smell of incense (cf. Rev. 5:8 and 8:3-4). In our worship we continue to use this same practice of offering incense in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Its sweet aroma symbolizes something pleasing and acceptable being offered to God. Burning incense is also a sign of reverence and dedication. We typically incense a loved one’s body at the funeral to reverence the temple of God that it had become. We incense the altar which represents Christ whose sacrifice we celebrate. We also incense the gifts of bread and wine which will become the body and blood of Christ. We incense the book of the Gospels because it is the Word of God. We incense the Blessed Sacrament because it is the True Presence of Christ. We incense the Easter Candle as the light of the world. We incense the priest because he stands in the Person of Christ the Head. We incense the people at Mass because they are the Body of Christ and the living stones of the Temple of God.

Most people remember incense with great fondness and love how it reminds them of holy things and holy times. However, there are some who have difficulties arising from asthma or other breathing problems. Here at the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul we are implementing more frequent use of incense while keeping in mind the limitations of some due to illness. We will hardly, if ever, use incense at the 5:30pm Mass on Saturdays. At the 9:00am Mass we will only use incense on higher feast days such as Easter, Pentecost and a few others as seem fitting. However, at the 11:30 and 1:30 Spanish Mass we will regularly use incense, even every Sunday. Hopefully this 'odor of sanctity' will pervade the whole space of the Sanctuary and remind us of the sweet offering God made to us of His son Jesus and will remind us to make our sacrifice of praise to God most High!



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