

Role of an INCENSE in the Sacred Liturgy

The Office of the Divine Worship of the Archdiocese of Portland here in Oregon issued an article about when and why incense used at Mass. This weekend, let me share with you this article that explains about the importance of an incense in the Sacred Liturgy. Yes, we see a smoke, we smell like a perfume inside the Church especially to the special occasions to solemnized the Sacred Liturgy that we celebrate.

Incense, with its sweet-smelling perfume and high-ascending smoke, is typical of the “good Christian's prayer”, which, enkindled in the heart by the fire of God's love and exhaling the odor of Christ, rises up a pleasing offering in His sight (cf. Amalarius, “*De eccles. officiis*”). Incensing is the act of imparting the odor of incense with its smoke representing our prayer rising toward the Lord.

Incense plays an important role in the Sacred Liturgy and has been employed in the Christian Liturgy from antiquity. When, exactly, incense was introduced into the religious services of the Church it is not easy to say. Still, its common employment in the Temple and the references to it in the New Testament (cf. Luke 1:10; Revelation 8:3-5) would suggest an early familiarity with it in Christian worship. The earliest authentic reference to its use in the service of the Church is found in Pseudo-Dionysius. The Liturgies of Ss. James and Mark, which in their present form are not older than the fifth century, refer to its use at the Sacred Mysteries. A Roman *Ordo* of the seventh century mentions that it was used in the procession of the bishop to the altar and on Good Friday (cf. “*Ordo Romanus VIII*” of St. Amand).

The thurible (censer) is held in the right hand at the height of the breast and grasped by the chain near the cover; the left hand, holding the top of the chain, is placed on the breast. The thurible is then raised upwards to the height of the eyes, given an outward motion and slightly ascending towards the object to be incensed, and at once brought back to the starting point. This constitutes a single swing. For a double swing the outward motion should be repeated, the second movement being more pronounced than the first. The dignity of the person or thing will determine whether the swing is to be single or double, and also whether one swing or more are to be given.

The incense-boat is the vessel containing the incense for immediate use. It is so called from its shape. It is generally carried by the thurifer in the disengaged hand or another server if available.

In the present discipline of the Western Church incense is more often used at solemn Mass, solemn blessings, functions, and processions, choral offices, and offices of the dead. On these occasions persons, places, and things such as relics, crucifix, altar, book of Gospels, casket, etc. are incensed. Usually when the Sacred Liturgy takes a more solemn form, incense is employed.

The current General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) mentions that incense is used at the Mass on five occasions. “If incense is used, before the procession begins, the priest puts some in the thurible and blesses it with the Sign of the Cross without saying anything.” [121] When the priest reaches the altar “he goes up to the altar and venerates it with a kiss. Then, as the occasion suggests, he incenses the cross and the altar, walking around the latter.” [123]

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. The times when incense is used:

1. During the Entrance procession;
2. At the beginning of Mass, to incense the cross and the altar;
3. At the Gospel procession and the proclamation of the Gospel itself;
4. After the bread and the chalice have been placed upon the altar, to incense the offerings, the cross, and the altar, as well as the priest and the people;
5. At the showing of the host and the chalice after the consecration. [Cf. GIRM 276]