

Once upon a time, in a far-away land, before the days of Air-wick and indoor plumbing, people's houses would get musty, and the odors of cooked cabbage and garlic would cling to the walls and curtains, and on damp days a crowded house might smell like the locker room of a gymnasium. Folks discovered, probably at first by accident, that if they would burn certain fragrant resins and gums the smoke would sweeten the air and make life indoors much more pleasant.

However, since these aromatic resins and gums were rare and costly, they were saved for those occasions when company was coming. Thus it came to be that burning incense became a sign of somebody important coming to the house. You walk in and smell incense and say, "Who's coming?"

So burning incense in the presence of someone very important came to be regarded as a mark of honor and respect.

Royalty and the aristocracy had incense burned before them on all public occasions. If you wished to honor a friend, you burned incense when he visited you.

Incense was burned in temples and all places of public and private worship in honor of the God who was to visit the temple. It purified the place in anticipation of his visit. The Jews did this, and the Christians took over the custom. "From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my Name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered in my name, and a pure offering; for my name shall be great among the Gentiles, saith the Lord of Hosts." (Malachi 1:11).

It is instructive to notice the places in the church service at which incense is offered. On the entrance into the sanctuary at the beginning of the Mass the priest "censes" the altar to prepare it for the coming of God on the altar. Then he himself is "censed" by

the deacon or thurifer, because the priest himself is to become an instrument through which God acts in the service.

The bread and wine are "censed" at the offertory, because God is going to visit them and make them His habitation. Then the congregation is "censed", for they are going to receive their communion - God is going to visit them. They further are due honor in their own right as the Mystical Body of Christ through which (with the priest) God acts to consecrate the Holy Sacrifice.

At the moment of Consecration the bread and wine (becoming the Body and Blood of Christ) are again "censed" by the thurifer, because God becomes present there.

God is really acting through His priests; God is really present on our altars under the forms of bread and wine; God is really speaking to us through the reading of the Gospel, and finally God is really and actually present

in the Christian who receives the Sacraments or hears His Word.

Incense is not used merely because it is pretty, or because it smells sweet, or because we like “high church”, but rather because, as a living link with Christians and Jewish antiquity, it assures us that the early Christians believed as we believe, that when we gather together in His Name, God is in our midst, that we do not merely remember a dead Jew but have Communion with a Living Christ, that we do not merely long for a heaven that is “up yonder” or “in the sweet by and by”, but adore an Eternal Lord who is “right here and now.”

It adds to our service an atmosphere of mystery - and well it might. For it signifies an invasion of the Eternal into time, of the Infinite All Holy into the midst of His people.

Additionally, we are called to glorify God with our bodies, and the use of incense with its sweet odor allows our sense of

smell to participate in our worship; just as our sight, sound and motion do as we look, sing, and position our bodies.

So when incense is offered, it should properly awe and impress us with the terrifying fact of the imminent entrance of Him who flung the stars into space and who numbers the hairs of our heads, yet whose tender love is concerned with the sparrow’s fall, who willed to be laid in a manger and nailed to a cross that you and I might know His love for all eternity.

Understanding its ancient meaning, as purification before the entrance of an important visitor, incense as the Church uses it is eloquent testimony and a vivid dramatization of the Church’s most cherished beliefs and vital experiences: God’s coming to man, really and actually, in man’s worship of God.

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From a brochure at St. John’s Church,
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Why Is Incense Used?

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