

## The Holy Rood Guild / Notes 1 - Incense

Because Christ has taken our flesh, nothing in the created world is ordinary anymore; because of the incarnation, all of the physical reality can be a place of encounter with God. The Liturgy of the Church always reminds us of this; the Liturgy celebrates this sacred meeting of human and divine which Christ himself embodies. During the sacred Liturgy ordinary physical sign—bread, wine, water, actions and gestures, music and incense—are all transformed and become for us gateways to the sacred. The kingdom of God's reign is made tangible and wonderfully present.

In the Liturgy we encounter Christ, wounded, crucified, gloriously risen, “the wisdom of God,” who, as the author of the Book of Sirach says, gives forth “perfume” and spreads forth fragrance “like choice myrrh...and like the odor of incense in the tent” (*Sir. 24:15*). The fragrant aroma of Christ's self-offering to the father on our behalf still rises up to god in our self-offering with him in the Liturgy. No wonder that St. Paul encourages us to imitate this “way of love” that is Christ who is the aroma of a “fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (*Eph. 5:2*). No wonder that Paul will call us “the aroma of Christ for God's sake” (*2 Cor. 2:15*).

The Hebrew Scriptures attest to the widespread use of incense in religious ceremony, as a beautiful and appropriate symbol of prayer and sacrifice. In the Book of Exodus God gives Moses a detailed recipe for sacred incense (*Ex. 30:34-38*), and the psalmist fittingly asks that his prayer arise before the Lord as incense (*Ps. 141:2*). In the Song of Songs (*3:6,4:6*) references to incense are intended as metaphor for the beauty of the beloved.

In the ancient world in general, incense had long been used as sacrifice to deities or an exorcism to drive out evil spirits. We also find it associated with rites of purification and healing. Incense was offered as sacrifice to the shades of the deceased or to honor the living. At banquets and festive gatherings and in triumphal processions, incense was a refreshing perfume that combated unpleasant odors and enhanced the air of festivity and celebration. Incense was even used as chewing gum to freshen the breath. When used as a cosmetic, incense has the power to allure, impress and please the deity or the beloved.

The early Church was understandably quite reluctant to include incense in the liturgies because of its associations with emperor worship and the tests of loyalty which many of the martyrs had been forced to undergo. Eusebius relates that some of the confessors had even been forced to hold burning coals in their hands while incense was sprinkled onto them. It is only in the fourth century that we have record of incense being used in a Christian ritual – the funeral procession of St. Peter of Alexandria in 311. Here at last we see the intuition of the early Church. The pagan connotations of incense use are set aside and the opportunity for symbolic transformation is clear – if pagan triumphal processions had used incense, how much more fitting to use incense in a Christian funeral procession which celebrated the victorious rising of the deceased to new life in Christ who had conquered death once for all. St. John Chrysostom will comment: “Do we not attend the dead as champions?” (*Hom. IV in Heb. Ij, 5-7*).

Soon we have incense introduced into the celebration of the offices of matins, lauds and vespers, and it will be used to honor relics, altars, holy places and persons. By the Middle Ages incense is fully integrated into the liturgical life of the Church. We see hanging or stationary censers placed at the tombs of saints or before their images. Tapers imbedded with incense are burned on festive occasions. In addition, incense becomes an oblation offered for forgiveness and repentance as well as a means of exorcism.

Today in the Roman rite we may use incense in various liturgical ceremonies. During the Eucharistic Liturgy incense may be used during the entrance procession, to incense the altar at the beginning of the Mass, during the procession and proclamation of the Gospel, at the preparation of the gifts and table, and at the showing of the Eucharistic bread and cup after the institution narrative. As the priest puts incense in the censer, he always blesses it with the sign of the cross (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal 235-6*).

During the celebration of morning and evening prayer, the people and altar may be incensed during the chanting of the gospel canticle. Incense is used to honor the paschal candle before the *Exsultet* is sung. (The custom of inserting five grains of incense into the Easter candle arose from a mistranslation of the Latin blessing of the lighted candle, *cereum incensum*, in the Gelasian sacramentary of the eighth century). When a church is dedicated, incense is used to consecrate the Eucharistic table which will be imbedded with the relic of a saint. Finally incense is properly used during

Eucharistic devotions as well as during the rite of the Christian burial to honor the body of the deceased.

Scents immerse us in places and events that we hold in memory. Scents attract or repel us; they warn us of things we cannot see; scents make our mouths water and remind us of people and places we love. The Church has not sight of the importance of the olfactory in enhancing her rituals. Fragrant clouds of incense during the Liturgy remind us that our earthly celebration is a window onto the heavenly liturgy where the saints worship the lamb amid the “golden bowls full of incense” (*Rev. 5:8*) which are their prayers. Incense imposed with dignity and festivity provides for our noses as well as for our eyes evidence that there is something sacred and extraordinary occurring during the liturgical celebration – Christ is present in the midst of his assembled people gathering them up into his fragrant self-offering to the Father.

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## Bibliography

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The monks of St. Joseph's Abbey produce two blends of incense, *Laudate* and *Cantica*, and *chrism*.