

JOE'S CAFÉ...Stop by for a tasty bit!

Joe Romanazzi, Past Grand Knight

Incense: A Symbol Of Purification, Protection, Adoration, And Gratitude



Incense and the smoke of burning incense have been offered as gifts to God and to others since ancient times. The Bible mentions the making and using of incense. For instance, in Exodus 30:34-35, *Yahweh said to Moses, "Take sweet spices: storax, onycha, galbanum, sweet spices and pure frankincense in equal parts, and make an incense, such as the perfumer might make, salted, pure and holy. Psalm 141:2, says, "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice."* Also, Matthew 2:11 tells us the Three Wise Men brought gifts of frankincense and myrrh as well as gold to the child Jesus.

Incense is an aromatic substance which is obtained from certain resinous trees. There are many different varieties of incense. Pieces of incense are burned by placing them directly on red-hot burning charcoal in a censer aka a thurible where it melts to produce aromatic smoke. The censer or thurible has a chain(s) attached to it for swinging through the air to widely spread the incense smoke. Besides serving as a gift offering to God, the ascending fragrant smoke is a visible symbol of our prayers rising to Heaven.

Incense is used in different ways and for different purposes in our Catholic liturgy. Among these are at any Mass during the entrance procession; at the beginning of Mass to incense the cross and the altar and at the Gospel procession and proclamation. It is also used for the rite of the dedication of a church or altar, in the rite of blessing of oils and consecrating the chrism and at exposition of the Blessed Sacrament when the monstrance is used. In addition, incense is utilized at funerals and during solemn processions such as the feast of the Presentation, Palm Sunday and Corpus Christi.

The Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Spain is a popular destination for pilgrims journeying the final leg of the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James). The Cathedral is also the home of a famous thurible known as the Botafumeiro, one of the largest incense burners in the world. As shown in two photos above, the Botafumeiro is suspended from the ceiling of the cathedral. The swinging of this 5-foot high, 121-pound silver vessel makes for a magnificent sight. In order to make the grand thurible swing, ropes must be manipulated by a team of eight professionals. One of the explanations for the great size of the Botafumeiro is that in the early days it was used to freshen the air in the cathedral after being visited by droves of travel-weary pilgrims. It was also once believed that the incense smoke guarded against contracting the many diseases that plagued the populace in past centuries.

My Brothers, whether you love it, hate it or are indifferent to it, the burning of incense is an important part of our Catholic faith. **St. Cardinal John Henry Newman** (1801–1890), in his novel *Loss and Gain*, describes the amazement of an Oxford student, thinking of the claims of Catholicism, when he enters a Catholic Church: ***"While he was thus thinking, a change came over the worship. A priest, or at least an assistant, had mounted for a moment above the altar, and removed a chalice or vessel which stood there; he could not see distinctly. A cloud of incense was rising on high; the people suddenly all bowed low; what could it mean? the truth flashed on him, fearfully yet sweetly; it was the Blessed Sacrament—it was the Lord Incarnate who was on the altar, who had come to visit and to bless His people. It was the Great Presence, which makes a Catholic Church different from every other place in the world; which makes it, as no other place can be, holy."***