Incense



The word "incense" is derived from the Latin *incendere*, which means "to burn". Incense was a highly valuable commodity in ancient times; a gift of incense was something to be prized.

The smoke of incense is symbolic of sanctification and purification. It also symbolizes the prayers of the faithful. It is an outward sign of spiritual realities, which is why it has its place in Christian liturgy – these two purposes reveal a deeper truth: that prayer itself purifies and sanctifies us, making us worthy of worshiping God in heaven for all eternity with the angels and saints.

References to the use of incense are throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), specifically, GIRM 276, describes these uses of incense during the celebration of Mass:

"Thurification or 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 optionally in any form of Mass:

a) during the Entrance Procession;

b) at the beginning of Mass, to incense the cross and the altar;

c) at the procession before the Gospel and the proclamation of the Gospel itself;

d) after the bread and the chalice have been placed on the altar, to incense the offerings, the cross, and the altar, as well as the Priest and the people;

e) at the elevation of the host and the chalice after the Consecration.

Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!
—Psalm 141:2

You shall make an altar to burn incense upon; of acacia wood shall you make it... And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall burn it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. — Exodus 30:1-10



Incense is also used on Holy Thursday, during the procession with the Blessed Sacrament to the altar of repose.

At the Easter Vigil, five grains of encapsulated incense (most often made to look like red nails) are embedded in the paschal candle. These five grains of incense represent the five wounds of Jesus Christ — one in each hand, one in each foot, and the spear thrust into His side.

At funeral Masses the earthly remains of the decedent and the catafalque may be incensed, and also the gravesite at the burial service.



God also gave instruction on how the incense should be made through a "holy recipe":

And the Lord said to Moses, "Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you; it shall be for you most holy. And the incense which you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves; it shall be for you holy to the Lord. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people." — Exodus 30:34-38

Sources: https://www.goodcatholic.com/holy-smokes-why-do-catholics-use-incense/; https://adoremus.org/2012/02/holy-smoke-the-use-of-incense-in-the-catholic-church/