

Incense

The smell of barbeque, fresh-baked bread and evergreen arouse our noses. They also fill us with warmth and welcome. Smells enhance our worship as well. The wax of candles, the bouquet of wine and the perfume of chrisem bring delight to the Catholic faithful. But our most famous smell comes from incense. It signals the solemnity of our common prayer.

The occasions for incense range from the ordinary to the exalted. If we wanted, we could use incense every day of the year, but we generally reserve it for big occasions.

Several parts of the Mass call for incense. When the entrance procession forms, incense may lead the way. When the presider reaches the sanctuary, he may incense the altar in reverence. In the Gospel procession, the deacon or priest may follow incense into the ambo, where he incenses the book before reading. After the gifts come to the altar, the celebrant may incense the bread, wine, and altar itself. Then a deacon or another minister may incense the priest and the people. When this happens, we stand up and bow when the minister bows before and after the incensation. It's a stylized way of saying hello and receiving the incense with the dignified humility of guests accepting a refill. During the Eucharistic Prayer, when the priest shows us the Lord's Body and Blood, a minister kneeling near the altar may incense this Sacred Banquet.

Other occasions invite incense too. At a funeral, we incense the remains of the faithful departed. At exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, we incense the monstrance. During solemn processions, incense takes the lead.

In the Scriptures, incense symbolizes prayer. Psalm 141:2 says: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you". Revelation 8:3-4 says: "Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hands of the angel". Incense delights the eye as well as the nose. As smoke rises mysteriously to the heavens, it bears our prayers aloft.

