

*EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH*

No. 5

THE USE OF INCENSE



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*Incense is made from the crystallised resin of certain trees which, when burned, gives off a fragrant smell. The use of incense in worship goes back to antiquity. It has been used by most religions, and certainly in Jewish worship in the late Old Testament period.*

Along with gold and myrrh, incense was one of the gifts offered by the Magi to the infant Christ, signifying his divine and priestly nature. Incense is mentioned by S. John in his vision of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 8: 3-5) and this account has led some to think that S. John was giving us a description of worship in the early, post-apostolic Church. Its use spread quickly: by the 4<sup>th</sup> century it was being offered in worship by Christians although, before this, it was disapproved of because of its association with emperor-worship. To this day, in the Orthodox Churches, the Liturgy is never celebrated without incense.

There are some who say its original use was primarily functional: it was used to cover up bad smells, not least in worship that required the sacrifice of animals! However, we can also recognise a far more important symbolic value. The rising smoke represents the prayers of the people (“*Let my prayer rise as incense in your sight*” - *Psalm 141:2*). Because God ordered that incense should be offered before him in the Temple (*Exodus 30:8*) it signifies the value of that which is censured. Therefore, to cense people or things means we acknowledge their value and worth. The use of incense also helps us to use senses other than hearing and sight in our worship.

Its principle use in the Mass are (a) in the entrance of the altar party and the censuring of the altar (with its echoes of the Altar of Incense in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem); (b) honouring the Book of the Gospels; (c) Honouring the elements, altar, priest and people at the Offertory (thus recognising the value and holiness of *all* these things), and (d) at the elevation of the consecrated Host and Precious Blood.

In the Church of England its use was taken up again during the revival brought about by the Oxford Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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