

## **Holy Smoke: The Prayers of the Saints**

### *Prayer*

Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of thy gospel teachings; implant in us also the fear of thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto thee. For thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and unto thee we ascribe glory, together with thine unoriginate Father, and thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

### *Introduction*

Coming into an Orthodox Christian Church, one of the first things we notice is that it has a distinctive aroma, incense permeates the space. Once we walk through the doors into the church, we know we are in a holy place, not only by the architecture and icons, but by the fragrance. In our tradition, nearly every service we offer is perfumed with incense. Why is this? Let's take a look at when incense is offered in the Liturgy, its role in the Scriptures, and how we too should offer our whole life as a fragrant aroma, a sacrifice to the Lord.

### *Incense in the Liturgy*

During the Trisagion Prayers, just before the Epistle reading, the priest takes the censer for the first time in the Liturgy. As he receives the censer from the altar server, he blesses the incense and censes the altar. However, this is not the first time incense is used on Sunday morning; it is used at the opening of Matins and during the Magnificat (the 9th Ode). And the previous evening, incense was used during the Entrance in Vespers and at chanting of Psalm 140, "Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as the incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice; hear Thou me, O Lord."

Among other reasons, we use incense in worship because we worship with our whole bodies. Worship is not just an intellectual activity but also involves our five senses. This is also illustrated in our physical motions in worship: making the sign of the cross, bowing, prostrations, and coming forward to receive the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist.

### *Incense in the Scriptures*

But the use of incense is not some tradition that well-meaning men invented. No, it was handed down to us from the Apostles; moreover, the Scriptures reference incense in the context of worship many times. This is especially clear in the Greek Scriptures. Whereas several Hebrew references are somewhat ambiguous, the Greek often clarifies that the sacrifice referenced is the sacrifice of incense.

In the ancient world sacrifice was about hospitality, a people dining with their God. Much as we might invite friends or acquaintances over to dinner to deepen and strengthen our relationship with them. Incense was a part of this hospitality as a fragrant aroma, to sweetly perfume the air and invite God to draw near.

As the incense is first used in the Divine Liturgy to prepare us to hear the Scriptures, let us now attend to some of them. In the Book of Exodus we read God himself gave instructions to Moses to create an incense altar for the Tabernacle. He commanded that Aaron and the priests offer a certain blend of incense on it every morning and evening. This practice is attested to in the later books of the Scriptures, for example in Chronicles and Judith. In the Church, we continue to burn incense daily to the Lord in the services of Matins and Vespers. The Prophecy of Malachi envisions a time when every nation will offer the morning and evening incense, “from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is glorified among the nations, and in every place incense is brought to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty.” Of course, as St John Chrysostom noted, it was not until the Eucharist was given, a sacrifice participating in the Divine Sacrifice of Christ, that the pure offering could be made everywhere.

In Leviticus, we see the consequences when we don't offer God acceptable worship. Two of Aaron's sons offer 'strange fire' and are struck dead by divine fire. Likewise in a passage we read in the first days of Lent, God says through the prophet Isaiah, that he abhors incense and burnt offerings offered out of mere rote, as a lip-service when the people's heart are far from God. Rather we need to be clean, without bloodstained hands, to approach God in his majesty.

Again in Isaiah, in the passage we have looked at so frequently in this series, his vision of the throne room of God, we see that incense is used to purify Isaiah of his sins, for a seraph took a coal from the incense altar and touched Isaiah's lips with it. God offers us salvation and cleansing, to make us worthy to approach him.

The use of incense is not limited to the Old Testament; in the New Testament, we see the role of incense expanded. St Zechariah, the father of St John the Baptist receives the vision of the angel at the hour of the incense. Famously, the Magi include frankincense among their gifts to the Christ child, signifying he is worthy of worship.

The last book of the Scriptures, the Revelation to St John, shows us that the incense in heaven offered by the holy ones is the prayers of the saints.

"And when [the Lamb] had taken the scroll, the four living creatures [that is, the cherubim] and the twenty-four elders [representing the patriarchs and apostles] fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."

This is not without precedent in Scriptures, the Book of Tobit describes Tobias exorcising a demon with prayer and an incense of unusual constitution. In the Book of Daniel, Azariah prays when cast into the fiery furnace:

For we, O Master,  
have become fewer than any other nation  
and are brought low this day in all the earth  
because of our sins.  
And in this time there is no ruler and prophet and leader,

no whole burnt offering or sacrifice or oblation or incense,  
no place to make an offering before you  
and to find mercy.

But rather with a broken life

and a spirit of humility may we be accepted,  
as though it were with whole burnt offering of rams and bulls  
and as though with tens of thousands of fat lambs;  
thus let our sacrifice come before you today,  
and may it accomplish behind you,  
because no shame will come to those who trust in you.

Furthermore we see in Revelation another reference to incense as the prayer of the saints.

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Our cries for justice do not go unanswered and in his time, the Lord hears our prayers.

*The Presence of the Holy Spirit and our Life as the Sacrifice of the Incense*

We know, as St Basil's Liturgy tells us, that we have done no good thing upon this earth and must be made worthy to approach God by his mercies and compassion which he richly pours upon us. The Holy Spirit communicates the Grace of God to us and makes us worthy to offer our life as a sacrifice to God. St Symeon the New Theologian writes:

As the incense catches fire and burns and gives off fragrant smoke, it signifies the grace of the Holy Spirit...who brilliantly illumines our

senses and at the same time makes them fragrant with a spiritual fragrance. He illumines, because He is Light and is seen by the pure in heart. He gives off a pleasant scent because He is the Tree of Life, which crucifies [that is, puts to death] the will of the flesh, and makes the whole world fragrant.

We see the Biblical saints offering themselves as a sacrifice, living faithful lives to Christ and mingling their prayers with the incense. We learn this also in the lives of the saints throughout the ages, for example, last Sunday in Matins, we heard the account of Ss Menodora, Metrodora, and Nymphodora the Martyrs.

A certain governor, Fronton, called for them [the holy martyrs]. Although they were great fasters and their bodies were withered, their faces were radiant, illumined by inward peace and the grace of God. He ordered that Menodora be tortured first. Fronton called out to Menodora, who was wounded and bloody: "Offer sacrifice to the gods!" To this the holy martyr replied: "Do you not see that I am offering my entire self as a sacrifice to my God?"

Sirach commands us to send forth a sweet fragrance like incense and blossom like the lily. St Paul states in his Second Letter to the Corinthians that we are the aroma of Christ to the world:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Our whole life is to be offered in service to the Lord, through faithfulness, in the grace and strength of the Lord.

### *Conclusion*

Incense is both cleansing and an offering; we first encounter it in the Divine Liturgy to prepare us for the Scripture readings. Other uses in the services remind us of its connection to prayer and that we are to offer our whole lives unto Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. To conclude, hear the prayer of the blessing of the incense in the Liturgy of St James:

Master Lord Jesus Christ, Word of God, who willingly brought thyself to God the Father as an unblemished sacrifice on the Cross, who art the coal in two natures which was carried in tongs to touch the lips of the Prophet [Isaiah] and took away his sins: touch also the senses of us sinners, cleanse us from every stain and present us in purity at thy holy altar so as to offer to thee a sacrifice of praise. Receive also this incense from us thy unworthy servants as a sweet-smelling fragrance; make fragrant the stench of our souls and bodies; and sanctify us by the sanctifying power of thy All-holy Spirit.

Are there any questions? {Questions and maybe answers.}

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

Our Father...

Through the prayers of St Nicholas of Thessaloniki, and all our holy fathers and mothers in the faith, O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen