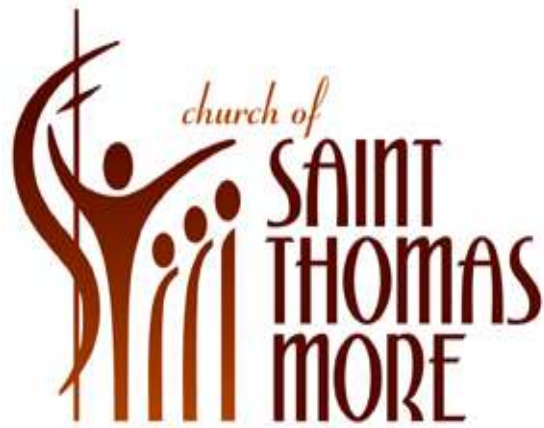


Incense

As Catholics, we celebrate the liturgy with our entire bodies — the “full, active and conscious” participation Vatican II called for. Most of the time, we use four of our senses: We see processions and the elevation of Christ’s Body and Blood; we hear the proclamation of God’s Word; we touch and taste the Body and Blood of Christ at Communion. On major feasts, and at funerals, we at St. Thomas More employ the fifth sense — the sense of smell—through the use of incense.



From the earliest days of worship in Judaism and Christianity, incense was a sign of a “pleasing offering.” Incense is mystical and as it slowly rises, it draws our eyes upward as well. The psalmist expresses the symbolism of incense and prayer:

“Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening sacrifice.”
(Ps. 141:2)

But the use of incense also has a practical origin. In the fourth century, soon after Christianity was no longer illegal, bishops were granted civil authority and all the “trappings” that came with that authority. So like kings and princes, bishops would have candles and incense precede them as they went about their civil and church duties.

One reason for the use of incense was the horrible stench in towns that had no sanitation or even good personal hygiene as we know it today. People didn’t shower or bathe daily. The incense was used not only to help with the smell but also because people thought it kept disease away.

Over time this became the custom for bishops and like other traditions, began to be theologized to fit into the realm of the sacred. It is the simple process of taking something ordinary and making it extra ordinary.

The smoke from the fragrant resin of the incense is seen as a way to purify the space, making it holy and ready for the celebration of the liturgy. Although we no longer need incense to help with disease or horrible smell, it does help us to center ourselves and let our minds, hearts and prayers rise with the plumes of smoke.

During Mass, the Book of the Gospels and the offerings on the altar are censed, and all the people are censed as signs that all are offered to God as a “pleasing offering”.

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