

## **Incense**

### **What is incense?**

Incense is made from various resins or gums which when burnt give off scented smoke. The incense itself is in the form of grains which are burnt on a base of red hot charcoal in a vessel called a thurible or censer.

### **Why do we use incense in our services?**

In the Anglo-Catholic liturgy we engage all our senses in the worshipping of God. Symbols and signs help us to point our minds to the invisible in ways that are richer than words alone. As a symbol incense is exceptionally rich in association – the Three Kings brought frankincense as a gift to the Christ Child, and the image from the Book of Revelation '*golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the Saints*'.

Incense symbolises three aspects of our worship. It signifies the presence of God; symbol of prayer and it is a sign of offering.

The rising of the smoke signifies our prayers rising up to God and its perfumed smell evokes a sense of God's presence – as the psalmist says in Psalm 141 '*Let my prayer rise before you like incense*'.

When we cense the altar at the Eucharist we are acknowledging it as the centre of our worship, we are gathering where Christ is known.

In the Orthodox Church you will see the priest cense the gifts of bread and wine, the offering to God and then all the icons on the screens and walls and then the people who are of course made in the icon (the image) of God. In our worship, in the words of the post communion prayer, '*we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice*' and this offering of our lives to God is expressed through the censuring of those in the sanctuary and the congregation.

Incense has been used in the Christian Church for centuries – it is a link to our past, a connection to God in our present, and a pointer to our future hope of heaven.

### **When do we use incense?**

At St. Paul's you will see incense used at particular points during Sunday Eucharist associated with its symbolism. It is also used at some funerals and where objects or places are blessed.

### **Who is responsible for the incense during a service?**

The incense is burnt in a thurible, which is a metal bowl on chains with a cover that can be lifted up so that the priest can put incense grains onto the hot charcoal. The bearer of the thurible is called the thurifer. This is probably the most difficult job on the serving team. Not only do you have to keep the charcoal alight throughout the service and be careful to avoid burning yourself and/or the priest, but you also have to cope with the opening and closing of the thurible, often one handed, without getting its



complicated chains tangled and all this before even thinking about how to cense others.

Accompanying the thurifer you will often see a youngster, the so called 'boat boy', carrying the incense boat, (a metal boat with a hinged lid and spoon) – their job is to present the incense to the priest.

### **What is censed and when?**

If incense is used at the beginning then the altar and cross are censed.

The Book of the Gospels is censed and incense burnt during the proclamation of the Gospel.

The altar and cross, the bread and wine to be consecrated, the sacred ministers, servers and the people are all censed during the Offertory Hymn.

The consecrated bread and wine, Christ's body and blood, are censed as they are elevated during the Eucharistic Prayer.

Watch very carefully, you will see there is a specific pattern to how the altar and gifts are incensed by the celebrant.

When censing a particular person or object, the number of swings of the thurible varies:

- Three Doubles: for the celebrant and concelebrant priests, the Book of the Gospels, the altar cross and the Paschal candle (when in the sanctuary at Eastertide) and at the elevation of the consecrated bread and wine.
- Two Doubles: for non celebrant priests and the deacon.
- One Double: for subdeacons, server's choir.
- One Triple: for the congregation (centre, left and right).

### **Blessing the Incense**

At Sunday mass it is the celebrant who places the incense on the charcoal in the thurible and each time he does so he offers a blessing. The boat boy or thurifer who presents the boat says '*Pray Father a blessing*'. The priest then places the incense grains in the open thurible saying '*Be blessed by him in whose honour you shall be burned*' (*Ab illo benedicaris in cuius honore cremaberis for the Latin Scholars*) and makes the sign of the cross. The thurible is then closed.

An application also takes place at the Offertory – again the thurible and boat is brought to the celebrant and a blessing is requested a different prayer is frequently offered at this point:

*'At the intercession of Blessed Paul the Apostle who stands at the right hand of the altar of incense, may the Lord graciously accept this fragrant offering to his praise and glory.'*

Next time you are at church watch the actions of the thurifer, appreciate their symbolism and tradition, and let the perfumed fragrance of the incense lift your thoughts to the mystery of God's presence.