



**Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass
Do This in Remembrance of Me,
Part 38, Incense
By FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL**



As we continue through the Offertory of the Mass, we now come to the point where **incense** can be used. Some of us may like incense, and others may not. Do you know what incense is made of and why we use it?

What is incense, and where does it come from?

According to the *Catholic Source Book*, “Frankincense... is the main ingredient in the incense used in today’s liturgies. A resin produced by a family of desert trees that grow in southern Arabia, it is derived from a sap that dries, forming crystalline lumps of an amber/gold color. For Christians, it has a rich prayer and purification symbolism. From the earliest Christian days, it has been associated with Christ, beginning with the Magi’s gift (Matthew 2:10–11). Even before that, the Jews regarded its rich spicy scent as a pure offering, pleasing to God” (p. 307). Charles Belmonte adds, “Incense is a resinous substance which, when placed upon glowing charcoal, gives off a balsamic odor as it burns. It had a place in Israelite worship; in fact, the psalmist compares our prayers to the smoke of incense, rising up to heaven. In the Book of Revelation, it is seen as a symbol of the prayers of the saints” (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 50).

Where is incense mentioned in the Bible?

Besides the Book of Revelation, incense is mentioned in the Book of Numbers 7:14 as part of an offering for the dedication of the altar. Deuteronomy 33:10 makes reference to “the smoke of sacrifice.” Exodus 30:34–38 describes blending aromatic substances with pure frankincense in equal parts, even describing how it should be ground into fine dust. In Revelation 5:8, St. John tells us the elders had “gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones.” In another reference, Revelation 8:3–4 describes an angel with a gold censer: “He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones... The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God...”

Hopefully, it is clear from these passages that there is a connection between incense and prayer and sacrifice. When incense is used in the Mass, there are times when it is clearly used to reverence people and things, which is especially clear when incense is used during the Offertory of the Mass. Referring to this part of the Mass, *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says, after the bread and wine are placed on the altar, “the Priest may incense the gifts placed on the altar and then incense the cross and the altar itself, so as to signify the Church’s offering and prayer rising like incense in the sight of God. Next, the Priest, because of his sacred ministry, and the people, by reason of their baptismal dignity, may be incensed by the Deacon or by another minister” (*GIRM*, 75). As the Diocese of Peoria teaches, “this particular incense shows a connectedness between the altar of sacrifice, those offering the sacrifice, and those uniting themselves to the sacrifice. Before being incensed we bow not only as a sign of reverence but as a sign of affirmation that, like the incense, we offer our lives to God and pray they be lifted up and transformed” (*A Study of the Mass*, p. 12).

Why is incense used at Mass?

One older priest once said to me that he loves using incense to honor holy people and holy things. As he sees the smoke rising, he is mindful that we are gathered together as God’s people in the Mass, joining Jesus in offering the perfect sacrifice to the Father. In the Mass, our prayers are joined together, and the incense gives us a visual reminder of those prayers being offered to God. He also mentioned he places one, two, or three spoons of incense (from the little container called an incense boat) onto the burning charcoal in the censer (sometimes called a thurible). For him, one spoonful calls to mind the Oneness of God; two spoonfuls point to the two natures of Christ (human and divine); and three indicate the three persons of the Trinity. For that priest, this is a simple way to recall core truths about God as we pray together in the Mass.

To summarize for us, Fr. Oury notes that incensing “is a mark of honor paid to the offerings that are going to become the Body and Blood of Christ. The honor extends to all the people participating in the celebration and to their offerings, which represent their life and work. Incensing is also a kind of petition, a deeply meaningful one. Through it we pray that the Church’s offering and the Church’s prayer may mount to heaven, to the presence of God above, like a veritable cloud of incense” (*The Mass*, p. 87).