



**Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass
Do This in Remembrance of Me, Part 39,
Incense - A Vision of Heaven
By FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL**



More on **incense**? This time, we allow incense to lead us deeper into the mysteries we celebrate. We mentioned last time a couple of passages in the Book of Revelation referring to incense (Rev. 5:8 and 8:3-4). If you recall, 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 the other passage, Revelation 8:3-4, St. John 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...” Whenever I pray with these passages, they paint such a vivid picture of the worship of God in heaven. They remind me of one of my favorite truths about the Mass: united with the one sacrifice of Jesus, we are participating in the heavenly banquet.

Unity in Communion

When we speak of our core truths about the Eucharist, we begin with Jesus becoming truly present in his Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. We also rightly say the Mass makes present the one perfect sacrifice of Christ and makes it possible for us to participate in that sacrifice. As if that were not enough, we also receive the great privilege of being able to unite with Jesus in a special way through worthy reception of Holy Communion (more to come on Communion as we get to that part of the Mass). And if we are united with Jesus in Communion, we are also united with all those in Communion with him, from all times and places. That is, we experience the taste of that perfect unity of the kingdom of heaven!

For me, the details St. John describes in Revelation provide a familiar description of the Mass, with the incense and people worshipping and responding, “Amen” (Rev. 5:14). Several saints have described similar visions of heaven, especially through the Mass. St. John Chrysostom said that angels join around the altar at Mass and sing God’s praises. He says when Christians participate in the Eucharist, they are in heaven, though not completely and perfectly. Blessed Angela of Foligno and St. Bridget of Sweden are others who experienced visions similar to what St. John Chrysostom describes. These saints help us realize that when we are joined in the Mass, we are joined together in a unified hymn of praise with a huge crowd! I am often energized by the realization that there are many souls joining in the sacrifice of praise, including those who have gone before us in faith.

A Foretaste of Heaven

Regarding the faithful departed, my sister died of cancer in 2011. Rebekah truly was a saintly woman who was loved greatly by her family, students, and all who knew her. Since she died, I think of her often, including what she would say or do and how she would react to a situation. As the years go by, there are times when she seems further away and is harder to remember. However, in the Mass, I always feel as if that gap is closed. Very often when I think of my sister in the Mass, she feels so close by. In the Mass, it is not hard at all to hear her singing or see her smile. Knowing what we know about unity with Christ and the graces of the Mass, this shouldn’t surprise us at all!

As you might have gathered, one of my favorite gifts of the Mass is the true taste of the fullness of joy and unity of the kingdom. Our Catechism teaches, “Participation in the Holy Sacrifice identifies us with [Christ’s] Heart, sustains our strength along the pilgrimage of this life, makes us long for eternal life, and unites us even now to the Church in heaven, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints” (CCC 1419). In Eucharistic Prayer I, we pray that we “who through this participation at the altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of your Son, may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing.” You may have noticed that we have jumped ahead in the Mass after having placed bread and wine on the altar. Well noted: next time, we will resume walking through the parts of the Mass. In the meantime, may the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints intercede for us, that all our receptions of Holy Communion might unite us more perfectly to Christ and one another and prepare fruitfully for eternal life to come in heaven!