

Why Is Incense Used at Mass?

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While walking from home to college recently, I saw large, spiraling smoke rising from a building on fire. The smell of smoke awakened childhood memories. As a youth, I lived close to a reservation where Native Americans burnt areas of the land to renew it and make it fertile for crops. I loved the smell of the burning fields of grass and flowers, but I was afraid of the fire and was sorry to see the colorful fields being destroyed.

Something both beautiful and terrifying was at work in the burning at the reservation that is akin to the notion of the “numinous” that theologian Rudolph Otto described in his writing. Briefly, this notion contends that something both mysterious and fascinating is at the foundation of faith. In Christianity, this something is the Paschal Mystery: Christ’s Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascension, and subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit, who incorporates us into God’s deepest purposes. The Paschal Mystery is about death and life (the Cross).

The smoke that came both from the fiery building and the burning of the land frightened and fascinated while also evoking death and life. Christ’s gift of himself on the Cross for the world was both terrifying (death) and fascinating (life) because through Christ Jesus, God brought about mercy, forgiveness, and compassion for the world. The Cross evokes, just as does smoke or incense, death and life, especially the death and life of Christ.

Like all created materials used within the liturgy, the power of incense



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to “speak,” or to convey meaning, is dependent upon our experience of it. Because I am aware of the damaging effects of fire, I know to call the emergency number when I see smoke rising from a building. In liturgy, incense takes on a *theological* significance in addition to its daily experience. Incense in liturgy evokes images from Scripture: the cloud of smoke God sent to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian slavery; the incense used in the Jerusalem Temple (Exodus 30:34–38), God’s instruction to Moses to make a mixture to burn like incense as a sign of God’s presence; prayers rising to God like incense (Psalm 141); the gift of incense that one of the Magi presented to Jesus.

In the liturgy, incense evokes God’s presence, inviting the assembly to engage with God in new ways through prayer. In its numinous quality, incense conveys the renewed life that Christ’s presence offers in the midst of death, or those experiences in which God’s purposes are extinguished, numbed, evaded, or rejected. While not reducing incense to any of a number of meanings, incense concerns encountering a God who repeatedly invites us to “smell” his purposes, despite our often resistant ways.

At funerals, the priest incenses the casket of the deceased person, enveloping the casket in smoke and fragrance, portraying the invitation into God’s presence and purpose in a new way of life.