

**The Sweet
Smell of . . .
Incense
at**

**ST. JOHN'S
IN THE VILLAGE**

www.stjvny.org

Manufacture of Incense

The production of incense varies greatly from maker to maker. Much of the oldest incense was made according to recipes which went to the graves with their makers.

Basically, the process is one of turning raw gums and aromatics into a hard resin which, when powdered and burned, creates a fragrant smoke.

Much incense comes from products of the Middle East and Eastern Africa although India also produces a lesser quality of incense. The boswelia trees are the source of the gums and they grow on the rocky hillsides and dry river beds of Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia and Oman. The gums are harvested by local workers who cut deep incisions into the barks of the trees which then bleed sap. The sap hardens into lumps upon exposure to the air. The earliest harvest produces the most fragrant gums. These gums are called olibanum (or frankincense) and the best ones, for the highest grades of incense, are the ones which are the clearest and most translucent. The best gums are also the most fragrant ones. In addition to the olibanum or frankincense, there is a second kind of gum which is harvested. It is called sumatra, and in its natural state smells something like vanilla. Mastic myrrh and copal, along with a few other natural resins are also used in incense manufacture.

The gums are blended in various proportions, they are boiled, aged and mixed with other ingredients to mellow the fragrance. Perfumes are also added to give variation on fragrance. Sandalwood and rose are two favorite fragrances commonly added to incense. Aloe wood and ethereal floral oils imported from Morocco, India and France may also be used. There is no standard "liturgical fragrance" for church incense. The more traditional blends incorporate

frankincense with sumatra, and add sandalwood, cedar and perhaps a few botanical scents.

History of Incense

Incense has been used in Christian tradition on and off since about 500 A.D. Some people believe that since incense is mentioned in the book of Revelation (8:3-5), it may have been used in the very early Church, but that is hard to document.

It is in Hebrew tradition that incense finds its most ancient roots. There appears in Exodus, a detailed recipe for making incense, using some of the same ingredients that are used for making modern incense. Incense was probably thought of as having purificatory powers since it was sometimes used in times of plague. Incense was certainly fumigatory in its function, an important aspect of its use in a religion which embraced the practice of animal sacrifices. Since its ingredients were costly, it was seen as a suitable offering to make in the presence of notable persons in the community. The offering of incense was believed to have effect in atoning for sin.

In New Testament traditions, incense is understood as symbolic. It represents the prayers of the saints ascending, like smoke, to the heavens.

Incense was probably used first in fixed vessels in which coals were laid and incense added. Portable thuribles, of the sort used at St. John's, were probably developed later, possibly imitating those used to herald the arrival of the Emperor in ancient Roman civil tradition. The custom of censuring things and people in Church only arose about the ninth century. Incense was generally abandoned at the time of the English Reformation, although there are occasional

instances of its use between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. It was only with the ceremonial revival associated with the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century that incense came to be used regularly in Anglican churches, and even then, only in those parishes associated with the more extreme practices of what came to be known as "Anglo-Catholic worship."

Use of Incense

Here at St. John's, we follow a very simple, restrained custom with regard to the use of incense. We carry it in at the beginning of the liturgy, we use it at the gospel, and we use it at the offertory in the midst of the liturgy. It is also customary in many places to use it throughout the eucharistic prayer and in the retiring procession at the end of the liturgy.

Incense is used to highlight the two principal divisions in the liturgy. It is used at the beginning to announce the start of the Liturgy of the Word of God. It is used at the middle of the service, the offertory, to herald the beginning of the second part of the liturgy, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, in which Christ comes to us in holy communion. Thus, incense serves to punctuate and highlight the important liturgical divisions of the Eucharist.

Incense is also used to "point to" things that are to be considered special or sacred. At the gospel, the book is censed--that is, the censer is swung in the direction of the book. This has the effect of pointing to the gospel book as the sacred pages on which the teachings, the passion, and the resurrection of the Lord are retold. At the offertory, the people's gifts--the bread, the wine, and the alms--are censed. This ritual points out those things which symbolize our life which we now offer to God. Twice during the

liturgy, the altar is censed and circumambulated (walked around). This ritual defines the sacred space which we call the altar, the place where Christ will become present to his people in the bread broken and the wine poured. At the offertory, the people are censed, first the ministers at the altar, then the congregation. This points us out as the people of God gathered for worship and commissioned for service. It is us to whom Christ comes in the Eucharist.

The use of incense is part of the sensual nature of religion in the catholic tradition. We do not worship just with words spoken and heard. We worship with all the senses. Color delights the eyes, the kiss of peace speaks to our need to be touched, and incense stimulates the sense of smell. Incense is one of the ways in which the whole human body is involved in worship.

Here are some terms associated with the use of incense that you might want to know:

- Thurible:** The vessel suspended with chains in which incense is burned. Also called a censer.
(See Thurifer.)
- Frankincense:** One type of incense, by tradition one of the gifts offered to the infant Jesus by the Wise Men.
- Boat:** A container for unburned incense, so called because its shape vaguely resembles that of a maritime vessel.
- Thurifer:** The minister who handles the thurible.
- Boat-bearer:** A minister, usually a child, who carries the boat.

At St. John's we change incense with the season, using a different type in Advent, Lent, ordinary time, and festivals.

Incense and Health

Some persons complain that they are allergic to incense, which is the reason why we use it rather sparingly at St. John's. Certainly it is not our place to say that liturgical incense is either good or bad for your health or that your own particular physiological constitution will react badly or positively to incense.

When any substance is burned, smoke particles are released. In the case of incense these particles are, we hope, pleasantly scented. Some respiratory specialists suggest that under normal conditions and with proper use, incense should not be harmful. If you find that you are bothered by incense, the best thing to do is find the spot in the church farthest away from the thurible and sit there, hoping that the incense will drift away before you must.

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The Clergy

The Rev'd Lloyd Prator, *Rector*
The Rev'd Samuel O. Cross, *Assisting*
The Rev'd Gary Hellman, *Assisting*
The Rev'd Sandra Michels, *Assisting*
The Rev'd Brian Grieves, *Honorary Assisting*

Worship Schedule

Sunday:	Eucharist at 8:00 am Solemn Eucharist at 11:00 am
Monday, Wednesday & Friday	Eucharist at 6:15 pm
Holy Days:	Eucharist at 6:30 pm
Monday - Friday:	Morning Prayer at 8:00 am