**Incense**

The use of incense for religious worship is pre-Christian. It can be found among various ancient cultures and is a regular feature of worship among the Israelites in the Old Testament. The first official mention of its use in the Christian liturgy dates to the fifth century (in the liturgy of Saint James and Saint Mark), though it may have been used even earlier.

During Mass or Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction, hot coals are placed in the thurible, the metal censer on a long chain. The incense is held in a vessel called the “boat.” At the appropriate time, the priest will place the incense on the burning coals which will produce the smoke and fragrance.

There are several reasons for the use of incense in the liturgy:

1. **Prayer**: incense provides a fitting symbol for our prayers – they are to rise up to God. Psalm 141 reads: “Let my prayer be incense before you.” We hope that our prayers are sweet and pleasing in the sight of God. In the book of Revelation, St. John (also the author of the fourth Gospel) witnesses the heavenly liturgy in a vision (we participate in this liturgy when we are at Mass): “the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones” (Revelations 5:8).
2. **Sacrifice**: incense, traditionally, was an expensive element. The burning of incense involves offering the best of what we had to God in worship.
3. **Virtue**: As Scott Hahn writes: “Symbolically, incense represents the zeal with which the faithful should be consumed, just as the incense is consumed by the embers. Equally, it is a physical symbol of the so-called good odor of Christian virtue” (“Incense,” *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 2009).
4. **Engaging the senses**: Catholic liturgy engages the senses in various ways. We are, as human beings, body and soul. Hence, God draws us to himself by engaging our senses. For most of us, the only time we see and smell incense is in Church. The smell and sight of incense becomes associated with the worship of God and powerfully engages us in what is happening on the altar.
5. **Mystery**: several years ago, in discussing incense, Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke about the way that incense evokes the sense of mystery. The smoke is a reminder that God’s greatness is transcendent, it “gets in our eyes” and keeps us from feeling that we have a grasp on the awesomeness of God. As Fr. Barron says, drawing on Pope Benedict, “It’s to block you. It’s meant to say, ‘don’t think you can see all that clearly what’s going on here. Don’t think for a moment that you’re in control of the situation. You’re not.’”