



# Liturgical Thought

## EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY<sup>1</sup>

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### The Reason for Incense

Incense is used in Christian Churches for four reasons:

The first and primary biblical reason for the use of incense in worship is to remind us of the sacrificial death and the glorious resurrection of our Lord.

Our Lord is the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. When sacrifices were made in the Old Testament, incense was used. When our Lord died, no incense was burned, but He was wrapped and buried in incense, (we will use Frankincense and Myrrh during penitential seasons, the very same spices given the Infant Lord by the Magi in token of His death to come and in which His body was wrapped for burial). He was anointed with Oxnard (oil mixed with spices and used for burial) by the woman in Simon the Pharisee's home. Where we find the Body of Christ, there, we find incense. In our worship, His Body is on the altar in the Holy Sacrament, therefore, incense in worship marks a Sacramental Presence of Christ's Body in the Service.

So it is that the aromatic perfume of incense today reminds us both that our Lord was sacrificed for our benefit and that He is the Resurrection and the Life. St. Paul picks up on this and applies it to us when he says that we are the aroma of Christ to God. In other words, we are God's incense since we have been raised with Christ in His resurrection through the waters of Holy Baptism.

Second, as we see in the Bible, that from nearly the very first, incense and worship go together. The holy prophet Isaiah and St. John the apostle and evangelist describe heavenly worship with the angels where the house and throne room of God was filled with [the] smoke of incense; *“And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was **filled with smoke,**”* (Isaiah 6:4, NKJV); *“Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and **golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints,**”* (Revelation 5:8, NKJV); *“Then another angel, **having a golden censer,** came and stood at the altar. **He was given***

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman's Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.) and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.

*much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand,*" (Revelation 8:3–4, NKJV), (see also, Luther's description in hymn TLH 249/LSB 960). In the Divine Service our use of incense also reminds us of the prayers of the saints going up to God.

In the Old Testament, use of incense also indicated a special relationship between God and His people. In the Book of Numbers (Chapter 16) Aaron was commanded by Moses to make atonement for the Israelites to appease God's wrath after the rebellion of Korah in the desert; "*So Moses said to Aaron, "Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the LORD. The plague has begun."* Then Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. **So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people.** And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped," (Numbers 16:46–48, NKJV). In the same story we also see God command Moses that incense was to be used only by the priests during worship; "*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Tell Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, to pick up the censers out of the blaze, for they are holy, and scatter the fire some distance away. The censers of these men who sinned against their own souls, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar. Because they presented them before the LORD, therefore they are holy; and they shall be a sign to the children of Israel.' So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned up had presented, and they were hammered out as a covering on the altar, to be a memorial to the children of Israel that no outsider, who is not a descendant of Aaron, should come near to offer incense before the LORD, that he might not become like Korah and his companions, just as the LORD had said to him through Moses."* (Numbers 16:36–40, NKJV) (Psalm 141, Revelation 8).

The third reason for using incense is to show honor. In the ancient East and West, incense announced the presence of a god. Since you cannot see God, your nose would remind you of His presence! Adopting this custom, Christian Churches used incense especially at those points where we need to be reminded of our Lord's very real presence: (a) at the reading of the Gospel, (b) in the Sacrament, (c) in the person of the pastor, (d) in the baptized who dwell in Christ and Christ in them. That is why the Book of the Gospels, the elements and altar, the celebrant, and the people are incensed during the Divine Service. It honors God by reminding us that He is in the midst of us.<sup>2</sup>

The fourth reason for using incense is beauty which engages the whole person. For not just the mind and heart are consecrated to God's Service, but also the hands, eyes, feet, taste buds, and even the nose! So, just as the beauty of the vestments and flowers capture the eyes and the sounds of the organ delight the ear, the sweet smell of the incense is intended to aid the senses in grasping the greatness of the feast.

After introducing and getting you accustomed to the sweet aroma of incense here at Redford, incense will not be used every Sunday as is now the case but will be used on particular occasions (i.e., feast and festival days, weddings and funerals when we celebrate Holy Communion as part of the service, the season of Easter, etc.) for all three reasons-beauty, honor, but especially to help us recall that in the Divine Service we celebrate the Service of our Resurrected Lord whose broken Body and shed Blood causes us to be the aroma of Christ to God.

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<sup>2</sup> You have not yet witnessed this since I wanted to slowly introduce incense to our worship by only burning incense before the service begins.