

# Holy Smoke at Mass

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Many of our readers may wonder at times if there is any rhyme or reason to some of the ritual behaviors we Catholics experience in our worship. One such mystery is the use of incense. Certainly, its use in worship has a place of prominence in scriptural tradition. We hear of it in the great rituals of the Temple in Jerusalem and even imaged in the Old Testament Psalms. Within the early Christian tradition, incense was used within the formularies of the funeral rites, not only to symbolize the prayer of the Church rising in union with the deceased member, but to offer some scented relief from the decaying body of the one being memorialized.

We might say that the use of incense in our worship today embraces all of those historic and practical uses. Mostly, however, the use of incense expresses the uniqueness of our praise of the one Triune God. It evokes something special in the prayer that we offer.

Provision is made in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) for the inclusion of incense during the celebration of Mass. There are no restrictions indicated at what Masses it may be included, but custom often finds its use at more solemn celebrations, including the weekly Sunday liturgy. Specifically, the GIRM indicates the use of incense during the 1) entrance procession, 2) at the beginning of Mass to incense the cross and altar, 3) at the Gospel procession and the proclamation of the gospel itself, 4) after the bread and the chalice have been placed on the altar, to incense the offerings, the cross, and the altar, as well as the priest and the people, 5) at the showing of the host and the chalice after the consecration (cf. GIRM, art. 276). Each of these suggested moments are considered high points during the celebration of Mass. Something or someone important is acknowledged by the use of incense.

To stress the importance of certain religious objects or persons even further, the ritual form indicates specific protocol with the use of incense. For instance, before and after an incensation, a profound bow is made to the person or object that is incensed, except the incensation of the altar and offerings for Mass (GIRM, art. 277). The Blessed Sacrament, a relic of the Holy Cross, images of the Lord for public veneration, the offerings for the sacrifice of the Mass, the altar cross, the Book of the Gospels, the Paschal Candle, the priest, and the people are incensed with three swings of the thurible (art. 277). The altar is incensed with single swings of the thurible. The reason for the distinction is the action taking place and the place of importance each object and each person holds in the celebration.