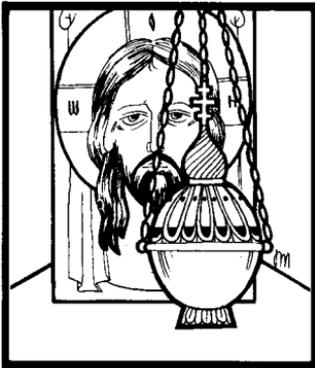


Chapter 2



Incense: We Are the Aroma of Christ to God

(II Corinthians 2:15)

Someone said once that incense does for the Orthodox in their weekly worship what organ music does for the Protestants: it lifts them over the threshold of the church.

It is not man alone who glorifies God with incense; nature has always done so. Beverly Nichols has written:

“Every moment of this strange and lovely life, from dawn to dusk, is a miracle. Somewhere, always, a rose is opening its petals to the dawn. Somewhere, always, a flower is fading in the dusk. The incense that rises with the sun, and the scents that die in the dark, are all gathered, sooner or later, into the solitary fragrance that is God. Faintly, elusively, that fragrance lingers over all of us.”

———— *The Oldest Silent Language in the World* ————

Science tells us that all around us the air is filled with subtle odors that, like sacred signals, communicate a variety of messages. It is the oldest silent language in the world.

Most living things still use the sense of smell to communicate. For example, when your pet cat greets you by rubbing her cheek against your leg, it has scent glands near the base of its whiskers, and is marking you with a scent that says to other cats, "This human is my property." Dogs, of course, do the same.

Scientists are now discovering special odors that reduce anxiety and stress in workers. They believe that the right odors may increase efficiency in factories and offices, and even reduce levels of aggression and violence in prisons.

We know, of course, that in ancient times doctors diagnosed illnesses by how their patients smelled. Typhoid fever was said to produce a smell like hot bread, measles like freshly plucked feathers, insanity like the scent of mice or deer, plague like honey, yellow fever like a butcher-shop odor. Odors are indeed the silent language still used by most of the world to communicate.

———— *Every Church Should Have a Fragrance* ————

One authority states that cities have an odor all their own—Pittsburgh smells of steel, Hershey of chocolate, South Chicago of soap.

Churches also have an odor all their own. Some are so stuffy that it is almost impossible to do anything but sleep in them. Others smell musty, for the fresh air seldom gets in. Others have a funeral atmosphere, as if the dead lay constantly in the shadows. Others are cold and chilly.

What a joy it is to get into a fresh, sweet-smelling church. After all, a church should have a fragrance about it that attracts people to it. It should have quiet, to purify the mind and strengthen the soul. It should have peace, which reinforces troubled minds. It should have strength to bring healing to the spiritually ill. It should have pungent activity, to lift children and youth. It should have the fragrance of flowers, to recall long-forgotten things of joy and beauty. Indeed, every church should radiate the fragrance of Christ. "We are the aroma of Christ to God," says St. Paul.

It is not strange then that incense has been used from time immemorial by many religions in the world to communicate important messages in worship. Let us see how this was done and what message is conveyed in worship today through incense.

Noah Offers Incense To God

When Noah came out of the ark to find himself and his family saved from the flood which had destroyed the rest of the world, he did something to thank God:

“Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of man.’” (Gen. 8:20-21).

After the flood had receded, Noah did not just say, “Thank you, Lord!”; He did something to thank Him. He prepared a burnt offering whose fragrance reached all the way up to heaven. The fragrant smoke ascending to heaven symbolized Noah’s prayers of thanksgiving rising up to God.

Zechariah and the Angel

We need to remember that every morning and evening in the Old Testament temple, a sacrifice was made for the whole nation. A male lamb, without spot or wrinkle, one year old, was offered in sacrifice. Before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice incense was burned at the altar of incense. The censuring of the altar morning and evening expressed the desire of the people that the sacrifices may go up to God wrapped in an envelope of sweetness and thus be acceptable to Him.

When God gave Moses instructions for the tabernacle that was built in the wilderness, he was told to build an altar of incense immediately before the Holy of Holies. An offering of incense was to burn continually on the coals of fire. Thus, the altar had a continual fire with incense burning upon it, and there were regular times during the day when it was specifically attended. The continually rising smoke symbolized the prayers of God’s people rising to heaven (Rev. 5:8-9).

It was the custom in the Old Testament for one priest to be selected by lot each day to enter the ante-chamber of the Holy of Holies in the Temple where he would offer incense to God. We read in Luke 1:8-23 that one day Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth and the father of John the Baptist, who was a priest, was

selected by lot to enter the ante-chamber to the Holy of Holies and offer incense to God. Holding his censer high, he began to mount the twelve steps, one for each of the tribes of Israel. Lifting the temple veil with his left hand, he disappeared into the tabernacle, where minor priests came closest to the presence of God. There was not much for Zechariah to do in the chamber of incense. He was to stand only for a moment in silent prayer. He was to look up at the golden candlesticks and down upon the cakes made of wheat and barley with oil of honey. Then, looking upon the twelve loaves of showbread in a prolonged moment of silence, he was supposed to swing the censer three times. After which he was to back out of the holy place, face the reverent multitude, and offer up the final prayer of blessing.

But you recall that something happened that day to Zechariah as he was offering incense to God. "There appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John'" (Luke 1:11-13). Commenting on this incident, St. Ambrose said, "Would that an angel would stand by us also whenever we cense the altar and offer our sacrifices."

The Angel of the Apocalypse

In the Book of Revelation we read, "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God" (Rev. 8:3-4). "Here we see that the incense represents the prayers of the saints—both those in heaven and those on earth—rising up to God as a fragrant offering of thanksgiving, as they sing a new song, 'Worthy is the Lamb.'"

The Fragrance of Mary's Anointing

The offering of incense is much like Mary's anointing of Jesus at Bethany. She poured an expensive perfume—worth a whole year's salary—on the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her

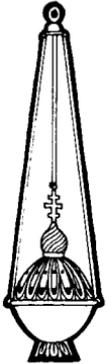
hair. The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. Judas objected, "Why this waste?" Jesus replied, "Let her alone. She is preparing my body for burial."

Romano Guardini has written,

*"The offering of incense is like Mary's anointing at Bethany. . . . It is the offering of a sweet savour which Scripture itself tells us is the prayer of the Saints. Incense is a symbol of prayer. . . . It rises like the Gloria at the end of a psalm in adoration and thanksgiving to God for His great glory. . . . It rises like beauty, like sweetness, like love."*¹⁰

— Clouds of Incense Symbolizing God's Presence —

When the Temple in Jerusalem was being dedicated, the glory of God descended upon the Holy of Holies in the form of a cloud (3 Kings 8:10-11). At the transfiguration, again, a cloud overshadowed Jesus. The voice of God spoke from the cloud saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him." In Old Testament thought, the presence of God is regularly connected with a cloud. It was in the cloud that Moses met God. It was through a cloud that God filled the Temple when it was dedicated after Solomon built it. And it was the dream of the Jews that when the Messiah came, the cloud of God's presence would return to the Temple. St. Symeon of Salonika suggests that this is why the priest censers the entire church before the liturgy, vespers and other services. The clouds of incense filling the sanctuary suggest the glory of God descending upon those who come to worship Him. He writes, "Like a cloud also the incense is offered, symbolizing the Holy Spirit and the transmission of His divine grace and fragrance."



— A Pinch of Incense to Caesar —

In the Roman Empire all subjects were required to appear before a statue of Caesar yearly, throw a pinch of incense into the fire that burned before it, and say, "Caesar is Lord." Because the early Christians refused to do this, they were thrown to the lions. It was unthinkable for them to confess publicly someone other than

Jesus as their true God. The pinch of incense for them meant a betrayal of Jesus.

I remember seeing a television film in which a group of Christians was huddled together in a dungeon beneath the Colosseum in Rome. They were to be thrown to the lions the next day. The Roman commander had fallen in love with a beautiful Christian girl and wanted to marry her. He tried to persuade his beloved to save herself from the lions by meeting the simple requirement of the Roman Government and putting a pinch of incense in the altar fire before the statue of Caesar. She refused.

“But it’s such a little thing,” he said. “Why should you die for being so stubborn? You don’t have to give up any of your beliefs or take on any new ones. We don’t ask you to stop being a Christian. All you have to do is just this little thing, so that the Government can know that you are a loyal subject. Then you and I can get married and live in peace. Is a pinch of incense so great a sacrifice for life, love and happiness?” Though she loved him, this young Christian girl refused to throw that pinch of incense into the fire. She had only one Lord and he was not Caesar.

A pinch of incense thrown into the fire meant acknowledging someone as god. Christians would burn incense before no one but the one, true Lord. This is one reason we continue to use incense in our worship today. Whenever I throw a “pinch of incense” into my censer at home before the icon of Jesus; whenever as a priest I cense the icon of Jesus in church, I am acknowledging Him to be my Lord and God.

The Meaning of Incense

The meaning of incense is rich and varied. It means the prayers of the saints ascending to God. “Let my prayer rise like incense before you, my hands like the evening sacrifice” we sing in the vesperal psalm (Ps. 140:2). Incense denotes the fragrance of prayer to God. Burning incense before Jesus is a public confession of faith in Him as our true Lord. The rising smoke of the incense calls on us to seek constantly the things that are above, where Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. It raises our sights from earth to heaven.

The offering of incense in vespers accompanies Psalm 140 and has a penitential meaning: It is a symbol of our self-offering, of repentance rising with our prayers and our uplifted hands.

The clouds of incense symbolize the glory of God that is present as we worship Him. When the priest turns from censuring the saints to cense each worshiper in the congregation, he is paying homage and respect to the image of God in each one of us. He reminds us of our high calling to theosis whereby we are invited to rise to where God is, becoming partakers of divine nature. In the words of Fr. John of Kronstadt, "The fragrance of incense reminds us by analogy of the fragrance of virtue, and by contrast of the evil odour of sins, and teaches those who are attentive to inward feelings to avoid the stench of vices . . . and adorn themselves with every Christian virtue."¹¹ As a prayer from the ancient liturgy of St. James says, "Receive from us your unworthy servants, O Lord, this incense for a fragrant sacrifice, and make fragrant the stench of our soul and body."

During the funeral service we cense the body of the deceased to pay respect to the temple of the Holy Spirit which God will one day bring back to life.

It is interesting that St. Demetrios is called *Myrovlitis* in Greek in view of the fact that the place where he was buried in Thessalonika emitted a fragrance. Other saints whose relics emit the fragrance of holiness are also given the name *Myrovlitis*, i.e., "emitting a fragrant odor." It is said of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp that his burning body emitted "a fragrant scent like incense or other costly spices."

Incense reminds us that God is pleased not just with fragrant smoke but even more so with the aroma of loving deeds done for His glory, i.e., visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked. The offering of incense reminds us of the words of St. Paul, "We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of life" (2 Cor. 2:15-16). If we are "the aroma of Christ to God," what aroma do we spread among those we meet? Does our presence add something to the lives of people or does it detract? Is God's name glorified through our presence or is it defamed? Only a good tree can bear good fruits—fruits that bear a sweet fragrance. Unless we

allow Christ to make us new persons, "a new creation," there is no way we can spread the aroma of Christ to others. For the source of that fragrant aroma is the presence of God within.

As we pray in the Supplicatory Canon to Our Lord Jesus Christ: "Jesus, sweet-scented Flower, make me fragrant."

The Perfume Shop

Among the stories of the desert fathers there is this one. "Whosoever enters a perfume shop, even if he does not purchase any perfume, leaves filled with fragrance. The same thing happens to one who associates with holy people. He takes on the spiritual aroma of their virtue." The real perfume shop is the presence of God. Enter there daily through prayer and you will indeed become "the aroma of Christ to God." Each morning spend time with God in prayer, and all day long your life will radiate the fragrance of Jesus.

The Fragrance of Holy Chrism

It is significant that the chrism with which we are anointed in the Orthodox Church following baptism is composed of a mixture of oil and balm with aromatic herbs. In other words, the oil is perfumed. As the newly baptized is anointed, allusion is made to Christ Who came to spread the perfume of the Gospel to all nations, that He "now grant that this perfumed oil . . . may dwell in him (the newly baptized) strongly and continually" (Const. Apost. VII, 44,2).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote: "You were anointed on the nostrils so that, perceiving the perfume (myron) of Christ, you can say, 'We are the sweet perfume of Christ'" (XXXIII, 1092 B).

The Fragrant Clay

An old Persian fable gives us a beautiful picture of the Christian life. One day a traveler sought a place to rest from the hot, burning desert sand. Gradually he became aware of a secret fragrance. Searching, his hand touched a small piece of clay and to his great surprise he found the answer.

"You are just a lump of clay," he marveled. "Tell me," he asked, "where did you get that rare perfume? It has the fragrance of a rose."

“You are right,” the clay replied. “I am only a piece of common clay. There is nothing lovely about me. But, Sir, I have been dwelling with a rose.”

This is the Christian’s beauty secret: dwelling with Jesus Christ, the Rose of Sharon (Song of Solomon 2:1). No one can be unattractive or dull who dwells in God’s presence because the very life of God is kindled within him. And everyone can sense it! To return again to the words of St. Paul:

“Wherever we go (Christ) uses us to tell others about the Lord and to spread the Gospel like a sweet perfume. As far as God is concerned there is a sweet, wholesome fragrance in our lives. It is the fragrance of Christ within us, an aroma to both the saved and the unsaved all around us” (2 Corinthians 2:14,15).

St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote about those who in Christ became rivers of perfume:

“The great Paul was such a river of perfumes flowing from the garden of the Church through the Spirit, whose streamlet was Christ’s fragrance; and other such rivers were John and Luke, Matthew and Mark, and all the others, the noble plants in the garden of the bride, who were moved by that luminous southern wind to become sources of perfume, shedding forth the fragrance of the Gospels.”¹²

On a hospital visit once, I asked to see a certain patient. The nurse replied, “Oh, he’s gone, but he left his roses.” In the light of Paul’s words “Thanks be to God who . . . through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere” (2 Cor. 2:14), there is a sense in which it is the business of all of us to “leave our roses.” Christ in us is to become a sweet fragrance to those about us.

A Look at the Censer Itself

Let us take a moment to consider the meaning of the censer. It has a basin wherein burns a charcoal on top of which is placed the incense which emits fragrant smoke representing our prayers as they rise to God. Germanos of Constantinople in his work “Mystical Theoria” (Migne 98, 400) interprets the censer itself as repre-

senting the human nature of Jesus, the burning coal the divine nature of Jesus, and the smoke the fragrance of the Holy Spirit. One writer interprets St. Germanos as holding the view that the basin of the censer represents the sacred Womb of the Theotokos which bears the divine coal who is Christ, Who in turn fills the universe with fragrance.¹³ The Twelve bells on the censer represent the twelve apostles proclaiming the joy of the Gospel to the ends of the earth—the three chains holding the basin represent the Trinity.

The priest offers the following prayer for the blessing of the incense:

*We offer incense unto Thee, O Christ our God,
for a sweet smelling savour of spiritual fragrance,
which do Thou accept upon Thy most heavenly altar;
and send down upon us the grace of Thy most Holy
Spirit.*

The Censing of the Sanctuary

St. Symeon of Salonika explains the censing of the sanctuary by the priest as follows:

“When . . . the priest has given the blessing, he censes the sanctuary, the nave and all present, since all things are sanctified—the things he censes, as being holy; the people present to sanctify them. Thus, beginning at the Holy of holies, the sanctuary, he censes everything in order. However, he does not cense them simply by chance, but he seals and sanctifies and offers the sanctification to Christ, so that it may become acceptable in heaven, and that the grace of the all-holy Spirit may be sent upon us. For this reason let nobody neglect the censing, since through it he receives the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

Thus, for St. Symeon of Salonika, censing was the symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We “offer incense” that He may “send down upon us” the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Fr. Robert Taft believes that “the vesperal offering of incense (that) accompanies Psalm 140 . . . has a penitential meaning: it is a symbol of our self-offering of repentance rising with our prayers and our uplifted hands. . . . The theme of repentance for the sins

of the day focuses on this evening psalm, the core of vespers which Chrysostom interprets as an efficacious act of perfect contrition. In time this penitential prayer came to be ritualized by the addition of a rite of incense."¹⁵

We Use Incense at Home

We emphasize the importance of every Orthodox home having a small portable censer next to the family icon. Parents should light the censer regularly, explaining its meaning to the children. A good practice would be for the parent to bless each child in his/her own room with the censer, allowing the fragrant smoke representing the glory of God's presence to fill each room. Imagine how many beautiful memories this act can instill in children. Every time they come to worship as adults later in life, they will be associating the fragrant incense with a host of endearing memories from their family prayers as children at home. Every time they see the priest censuring the altar and the people in the liturgy, they will stand in awe in the presence of the Lord. They will see in the rising smoke, their own prayers ascending to God. God is so real, so immanent in Orthodox worship that He can be *seen* in the icon, *heard* in the Gospel reading, *tasted* in the Eucharist, *touched* as we kiss the icon and exchange the kiss of peace, and *smelled* in the fragrance of incense. He can be experienced as a living God through all five senses.

"A Fragrant Offering"

As a rose that is crushed produces a powerful fragrance, even more so, the Body of Jesus when broken on the Cross for our salvation, produced the sweetest fragrance this world has ever experienced. St. Paul alludes to this in Ephesians 5:2 when he writes, "Christ loved us and gave Himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." This idea of a "fragrant offering" has been incorporated into the liturgy itself, specifically in the petitions: "For the precious gifts here offered . . . let us pray . . . that our God who loveth mankind, Who has received them into His holy and heavenly altar for a sweetsmelling savour of spiritual fragrance may send down upon us divine grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit."

May the fragrance of incense that greets us as we enter church ever remind us of Jesus Who “loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2).

PRAYER

*In the evening, morning and noontime,
We praise You, we bless You, we give thanks
to You, and we pray to You, O Master of all,
O Lord Who loves humankind. Guide our
prayers aright as an offering of sweet incense
before You; let not our hearts incline
in words or thoughts of wickedness,
but save us from all dangers and from the evil
powers that pursue our souls. For to You,
O Lord, are our eyes directed, and in You
have we hoped. Let us not be put to shame.
For to You belong all glory, honor,
and worship, to the Father and the Son
and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.*

*Prayer of the Entrance
of the Great Vesper Service*