



I love incense; it is very evocative of the mystery of the Mass. However when it is used at Sunday Mass every week I think it loses its impact. Furthermore it changes the pace of the liturgy, and when it's not part of a special Mass, serves to impede the flow.

Your reflection brings us back once again to the difference between Early Christian (Patristic) liturgy – which in its fully developed form has always been preserved by the Eastern Churches – and Western Medieval liturgy – which developed under Germanic influence in continental Europe and was continued by the Roman Catholic Church after the Reformation until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) re-established Patristic liturgy as the “ordinary form” of the Mass in that Communion.

Incense in the Judaic-Christian liturgical tradition goes back – scholars say perhaps as early as the 900's B.C. – to the Temple worship in Jerusalem, being one of the costly offerings sacrificed to YAHWEH there. Its use was theologically integral to the liturgy, not decorative.

Some scholars believe that the Revelation 8.3-5 reference to incense in the New Testament indicates its liturgical use in the earliest decades of the Christian Church. However, the first clear documentation of incense in the young Church's liturgy comes with the public freedom granted the previously persecuted and illegal Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 311. Like its use in the Temple, incense was theologically integral to Christian liturgy, not decorative.

The first specifically Christian liturgical theological account of incense was of the funeral procession of St Peter of Alexandria in A.D. 311. There incense was used not for sacrifice but to honor (its purpose in ancient Roman culture) the body of the deceased. It was a public theological statement that, unlike popular Roman belief that death ended human existence, the Church taught the hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

The Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of Rome in A.D. 313 in an (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to shore up the declining Empire. Therefore he insisted that the clergy be, act like, dress like, and receive the symbolic honors exclusively accorded, powerful Roman officials whose pronouncements commanded obedience. Among officials' highly visible symbolic honors was having incense carried before them and being publicly censed. In its liturgy, however, the Christian Church not only censed the clergy, the Altar, and the Gospel Book (which represented Christ) but also censed everyone gathered and their offering. In the ancient Roman world this was a radical act which declared that all the People of God are equally significant in the Body of Christ, a fundamental and very counter-cultural liturgical theological statement.

After Constantine's division of the Empire into Eastern and Western administrative units and then the fall of the Western half in A.D. 476, the Church *de facto* began two separate lines of cultural and liturgical development (which tragically became *de jure* in 1054). The Eastern Churches remained rooted in the theological and liturgical tradition of the Patristic (Early Christian) Church. In continental Europe, however,

under Germanic domination, the Western Church developed in the Middle Ages a very different liturgical tradition and theological emphasis.

In Eastern liturgy – like the Patristic Church – incense continued to be an integral part of the Liturgical Theology of all celebrations of the Eucharist without exception. In the West, however, it became primarily a decorative element which was rubrically restricted to Solemn (“full”: full number of liturgical ministers, full ceremonial, etc.) liturgies as another means of making them “special.”

In 1963 the Second Vatican Council decreed that Early Christian, rather than Medieval, liturgy and Liturgical Theology would become the norm in the Roman Catholic Church. The “New Rite Mass” promulgated on Holy Thursday 1969 permitted the use of incense at all celebrations of the Eucharist.

Having grown up in pre-Vatican II Chicago Archdiocesan Roman Catholicism you certainly come by your perceptions honestly. However, all Catholic Liturgical Theologians as well as Anglicanism as a body – which in its 16th century Patristic renewal officially established Early Christian theology, spirituality, and liturgy as normative – say that incense should *not* be special. That is, where used it should be so normal that, like vestments and the music of the liturgy, it does not call attention to itself. It is, they would say, not merely a decorative element to make occasions special but an integral part of the theological meaning of the liturgy.

You are absolutely correct when you say incense “changes the pace of the liturgy, and when it’s not part of a special Mass, serves to impede the flow.” In fact that is intentional. The pace of Benedictine liturgy, to which this parish has been firmly and officially committed for almost 30 years, is indeed much more calm and unhurried – and hence meditative and transcendent – than often comparatively-frenetic suburban parochial liturgy. This calm, transcendent, meditative pace is something we at St Paul’s are specifically trying to achieve; and your perception is correct, incense helps create it.

Several years ago a parishioner who has a keen sense of both Liturgical and Ascetical Theology said that she felt that something was missing at the Preparation of the Gifts in the Eucharist. We offer the bread and wine, but there does not seem to be, she said, any sort of affirmation of the acceptability and acceptance of our gifts. That is exactly what happens when first the gifts themselves and then each person present is censed at the conclusion of the preparation. This is an authoritative liturgical theological statement that both our gifts and ourselves as the givers are acceptable and accepted by God. This is a very powerful and important statement as Jesus Christ Himself actually comes into our midst and into our lives.