



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Why and how do we use incense in worship?

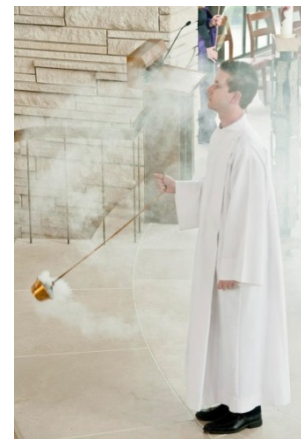
The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Background

The use of incense was a part of the religious rites of ancient cultures and has also had a long history in both Judaism and Christianity. Incense is mentioned frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures. The psalmist expresses the symbolism of incense and prayer: “Let my prayer rise like incense before you; the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” (Psalm 141:1). In the Gospel, Zechariah is in the temple at the time of the incense offering (Luke 1) and the gifts the Magi offered to the Christ Child included gold, frankincense and myrrh. In Second Corinthians the knowledge of Christ is compared to a fragrant odor (2:14-16). The vision of heaven in Revelation includes the elders holding bowls of incense, described as the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8).



The clouds of incense represent cleansing and purification, and the sweet smell suggests Christ's robe of righteousness that covers our sin. Incense is sometimes used to give honor to holy things and holy people, the primary symbols of the liturgy. For example, the gospel book, the altar, the bread and wine, the ministers and the assembly are incensed as a way of showing their importance in worship. Incense is also used to add a festive accompaniment to processions, adding “holy clouds” and “holy smells” to the air.



Incense deepens our experience of worship because it incorporates the sense of smell. Worship involves all of our senses, showing the significance of our bodies and all of God's creation. The sweet smell of incense can be a doorway to the holy in the same way that beautiful music and the visual arts can lead us to ponder the mystery of God's presence.

Practice

A congregation that wants to introduce incense in the liturgy may choose to first purchase a brazier or pottery bowl. Incense could be used before the service or during the Great Thanksgiving. The strongest connections to scripture will be made by using incense during Psalm 141 at Evening Prayer (See ELW p. 312). A bowl of incense can also be carried in a procession before the cross.

A thurible (also known as a censer) is the vessel that is typically suspended by chains and used for carrying incense in a procession. The grains of incense are kept in a vessel known as an incense boat and are then sprinkled by a spoon onto a lighted charcoal in the thurible. The person who carries the thurible is called a thurifer.



In the service of Holy Communion, the thurible may be used in the entrance procession (marking the space and the gathered people of God), the gospel procession (marking the highpoint of the Word portion of the service), at the offertory to cense the bread and wine (marking the Meal portion), and at sending (heightening the importance of our ministry in the world). During Morning and Evening Prayer the altar is often censed during the Gospel Canticle, connecting daily prayer with its central foundation, the weekly celebration of Holy Communion.

Two dimensions of introducing or using incense more regularly call for pastoral sensitivity. First, some people are allergic to incense. This does not preclude its use, but steps can be taken to be more hospitable. Non-allergenic incense is available and research can be done to choose a high quality brand. Also, in some cases, it is the charcoal, not the incense, that triggers reaction. If after attempting alternatives there is genuine health concern (this is different than psychological reticence), incense may be used only occasionally and by providing an announcement in advance. When incensed is used, opening a window, turning on a ceiling fan, or using a modest amount of incense are other ways of being sensitive to the whole assembly without compromising the multi-sensory richness that incense can bring to worship.

In some congregations there will be those who resist the use of incense because it is considered too “Catholic” or “High Church.” This concern can be addressed by stressing how our entire liturgy and its symbols and actions are based in our common western catholic tradition; we hold much in common with the Roman Catholic tradition and this can be celebrated. Congregations can also take the time to explore the scriptural references to burning incense (see Background above).

In all uses it is important that consideration be given for the care and safety of the people involved. Sensitivity to the amount of incense applied to the charcoal is also needed and will vary depending on the size of the worship space. Careful attention to these details is needed when using incense.

RESOURCES

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail and Mons Teig. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Keeping Time, The Church's Years*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. See specifically the section addressing Psalm 141 in Evening Prayer, pp. 148-149.
- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- 📖 Van Loon, Ralph and Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook: A Practical Guide for Parish Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

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