

“Swinging the Incense through the Ages”

THE NATIONAL VERGERS’ CONFERENCE – St Louis

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SLIDE 1:

The Lord is in His holy Temple, come let us pay homage before HIM.

The Incense wafts before an Icon of the Christ denoting devotion. In the Gospel of Matthew, the magi came from afar to pay honor and respect to a new King, by offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These denoted kingship, divinity and humanity...with the middle gift perhaps being most important for us earthly mortals valuing our Creator.

Incense traditionally was/is to heighten the senses of the living to the presence of God, and to call upon the cloud of witnesses to animate, and to help us experience the Divine.

YET...over the last five thousand years...incense found its way into many areas.

SLIDE 2:

Incense allowed pharaohs and priests in Ancient Egypt to heighten yet blur lines of immortality.

Incense seeded the legends of Apostate gods and emperors in Classical Rome as burnt offerings filled the air with the demands of the Empire, and for the Empire.

SLIDE 3:

Incense provided ‘medicinal’ cloaking for doctors in the midst of Bubonic Plague

Incense was ‘cover’ for the 1960s/1970s Hippies in America...and still continues into the throngs at modern rock-in-roll concerts.

SLIDE 4: In more traditional senses, Incense fills the Temples of the Orient

SLIDE 5:

From the earliest liturgies in Armenia, Incense has been a dominant feature across the churches and cathedrals of the Orthodox faithful.

SLIDE 6:

Since TIME IMMEMORIAL, Incense has been a part of our Judeo-Christian story.

Incense began with the first righteous brothers Abel and Seth, who built the original Altars to pay homage to God by offering thanksgiving for their harvests reaped, and for their blessings received.

SLIDE 7:

In a time of holiness showing an alternative to animal sacrifice, the King / High-Priest Melchisedek offers bread and wine to the guest in a manner of hospitality by greeting the stranger as you would your God...a concept adopted by Benedict of Nursia centuries later, and of course a central tenet of our Christian heritage.

SLIDE 8:

In Holy Scripture, we recall a smoking pot over the sacrifice to sanctify the Covenant between Abraham and God. This shows how God deigned and desired sacrifice in homage to the relationship. Incense symbolically continues the drawing of this notion into modern times with Jesus Christ being the New Covenant with humanity.

As believers and followers of Jesus Christ, each of us is a manifestation through which others may see the wonderful world of faith, hope and love on offer. We are asked to help others see Jesus, just as others are asked to help us encounter Him in our daily lives.

SLIDE 9:

During and after the Exodus...Moses transposed the Israelite experience of Incense offerings before the Pharaohs to something more akin to his father-in-law Jethro's cultic worship of the Almighty Omnipotent Yahweh. As the people traveled, they established The Tent of Meeting where the Divine could dwell with His People. From this holy place, incense wafted night & day as a sign of the Presence, until the settlement of Jerusalem.

SLIDE 10:

In the Old Testament lesson from 1 Kings and in Psalm 84, we encounter the coming of God into the midst of His Chosen People in order to dwell in the Holy of Holies. With the minor exception of the exilic Babylonian Captivity, most Jews centered their faith and responses to God as the "*Shekinah Glory*," the Divine Presence upheld on a throne suspended on the wings of seraphim and cherubim above the Ark of the Covenant.

As some have heard Matthew Corkern say, "IF there is one moment recounted of ancient times in the Annals of our Jewish ancestors that I wish I could have witnessed, it would have been the dedication of Solomon's Temple in 832 BC."

"With copious incense, festival vestments, unfurling cords of music, meandering processions and captivating prayers, the Liturgy must have been splendidly outrageous and quite simply something extraordinary to behold."

Surrounded by the elders and tribal leaders of Israel, the wise King Solomon called forth the Israelite benefactor, and invited the Lord of Hosts, the Creator of the Universe, the eternal Yahweh, to dwell among His people forever.

SLIDE 11:

From the completion of the Temple under King Solomon to the destruction of the Temple under the Romans, the Israelite people set their sights on the actual presence – the glory of the Lord – centered in the city of Jerusalem. In fact, the word ‘Jerusalem’ or its synonym ‘Zion,’ appears 821 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, proving this centrality to Jewish faith and consciousness.

It has been said that *the Divine Presence rests within a domain that is hidden, concealed behind a screen of mystery*...yet reached perhaps by prayer and the experiences unfolding in our lives.

With each succeeding king and prophet, the worship in the Temple became more stratified and unique. Again incense drifted through the air daily to convey the Glory of Lord amidst His People Israel; but also, probably to hide the constant stench of animal sacrifice.

These practices continued until 70 AD – the year of the Roman destruction of The Temple. Then the concept of God was conveyed to an inward rather than an outward dwelling.

SLIDE 12:

Incense & animal sacrifice declined at least for Christians from the expulsion of Temple prior to the diaspora of the Jews.

The Home-churches would have had sweetly scented incense burned at gatherings - but incense was now in a decline.

In temperament and time, we acknowledge ourselves and others to be the lost Ark of the Covenant, bearing the angelic glory-seat in our hearts, minds and souls.

Our thoughts focus on the most sacred site where the sacrifices owed to God were carried out perpetually by an ancestral priesthood amidst the gathered People.

Of course, this symbolic sacrifice, according to the ancient Covenant, is still offered across Christendom week-by-week in the celebration of Holy Communion....and sometimes is still enhanced with incense.

Eventually, the 'Celtic' monastic communities re-established Incense to heighten overall worship, and to mark a place holy. As the waves of missionaries moved out from the Sinai Desert across global regions, incense was carried forth to distant lands alongside the Gospel. (In places illustrated here with St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai and St Columba's Community on Iona.)

SLIDE 13:

As a historical footnote...We know that King Ethelbert met St Augustine outside Canterbury in an open field, as the Druid priesthood warned against being confined in a walled space where the Christian 'pagan' smoke might overwhelm, poison or even convert the king's senses. Happily enough, the teachings of the Church were soon accepted with mass baptisms and the Roman Catholic Church established itself and spread across England from the kingdom of Kent.

SLIDE 14:

Incense was to continue as a tool to draw the people's attention throughout the Middle Ages and to celebrate different seasons and feasts with a variety of spices and smells. Overtime, the holy Mass demanded the use of incense. And all major events of the nation and the Church yielded high pageantries with 'holy smoke' to convey the ancient belief that God was indeed present among His people.

From the Easter Vigil in the HOLY SEPULCHRE in Jerusalem, to state funerals in seats of power, incense brought a mystique to the proceedings with the Lord being called into attendance among the Great and Good.

SLIDE 15:

Coronations of medieval and pre-modern kings and queens brought forth anointing and censing the Altar and Throne as a connotation, or a return of sorts to the time of Solomon. Even down to today, eight vergers light and swing the remarkable Botafumeiro to heighten the Mass welcoming Pilgrims, or to celebrate the presence of Royalty paying homage to St James after their coronation.

SLIDE 16:

Eventually in historical terms, incense was diminished at The Reformation.

The 200 years that in succession saw the black-mouth babblers (known as Puritans), The Great Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution, holy smoke had virtually ceased to swing.

However, with the **Advent of the Oxford Movement** in the early 19th Century, scholars and priests harkened back to the halcyon days of the Early Church. They revived the practices of the Desert Fathers, and reintroduced the theological writings of the Patristic Saints.

The Sacrifice of the Mass – a return to the principle focus on Holy Communion – became canon, with wafer bread, two drops of water mixed in the wine, and the re-introduction of candles. Vestments re-emerged with liturgical colors and patterns. Incense pots were relit to bring forth a slight recollection of the past, to remind modern Christians that we had been here before.

SLIDE 17:

Into modern times, we can see Churches and Cathedrals across the planet embrace heightened sacred worship against the backdrop of Liturgical Renewal.

SLIDE 18:

So, the next time people accuse incense of being a new-fangled modern development drawn from the 1960s, you point out the trajectory of Faith and Form.

From faithful brothers to ancient monarchs, from saints and sinners alike... incense has been valued and employed in worship since the dawn of time.