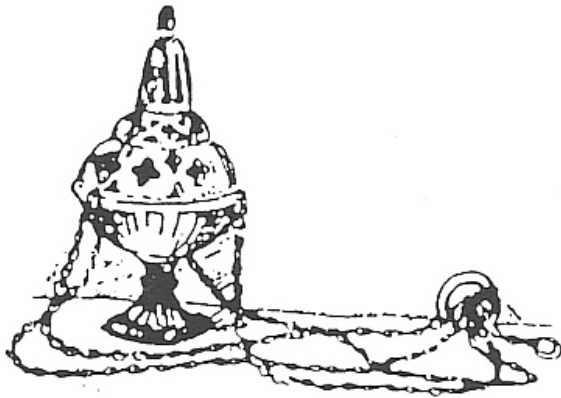


HEAVEN ON EARTH



The Raising of Incense

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Get Ready!

A town received the news that their king was coming for a visit. On the morning of his visit, while the citizens were still making last minute preparations, a young boy went to the edge of town to await the arrival of the visitor he had only heard about. The king arrived quietly at dawn and found him waiting alone. After having spent a few hours talking with each other, the boy joined the king and entered town together. Now the young boy no longer felt that he was welcoming a stranger, but an old friend.

One factor that prevents us from fully benefiting from the Divine Liturgy is coming late. The Raising of Incense, which takes place before the start of the Divine Liturgy, prepares us for the arrival of the King. This service prepares us for the two key parts of the Divine Liturgy by which we receive the Lord most personally: 1) the Reading of the Holy Gospel and 2) the Eucharist. In attending the Raising of Incense, we will strengthen our relationship with the Lord through its prayers, and know more intimately who it is we are receiving.

What is the Raising of Incense?

The service of the Raising of Incense takes place on the evening before and on the morning of the Divine Liturgy. The evening service is also known as Vespers, while the morning service is known as Matins.¹

Incense is produced by burning gums or resins on charcoal.² These substances are often mixed with perfumed oils, so that they produce a sweet-smelling aroma when burned. The priest raises and offers incense around the church by means of the censer.

The Raising of Incense contains the following prayers and hymns in this order:

1. Introduction and the Lord's Prayer
2. The Prayer of Thanksgiving
3. The Verses of Cymbals and the first Procession of Incense
4. The Litanies (for the departed, the sick, the travelers, the oblations).
5. Prayers ("Graciously, O Lord", the Gloria, the Thrice-Holy Prayer, the Lord's Prayer) and the second Procession of Incense
6. The Doxologies
7. The Introduction to the Creed and the Creed
8. The Prayer of "O God, have mercy upon us"
9. The Litany for the Gospel and the Gospel Reading
10. The Five Short Litanies (for peace, the fathers, the place, the waters/plants/fruits, and the assemblies).
11. The Absolutions, Conclusion, and Blessing.

The Litany for the Departed is only prayed during Vespers and Saturday's Matins service. The prayer of "Graciously, O Lord" is only said in the evening.

During the Matins service on Sunday and major feast days, the Litany for the Sick and the Litany for the Oblations is prayed. On days other than Saturdays, Sunday, and major feast days, the Litany for the Travelers is prayed instead of the Litany for the Oblations. The Gloria is prayed during Matins only.

Incense in the Holy Scriptures

The Coptic Orthodox Church bases her rites on the Holy Scriptures. In the early years of Christianity, the offering of incense was often associated with pagan worship, and many Christians were persecuted because they refused to raise incense before idols. With the passing of idolatrous persecution, the biblical tradition of the use of incense returned to Church worship.

In the Old Testament, the Jews were only allowed to offer incense in the Temple. The use of incense in the New Testament, therefore, fulfills the prophecy of Malachi, when God spoke through him saying, *“For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations”* (Mal. 1:11).

The Raising of Incense is found in other parts of the Bible. In the Old Testament, we read of the preparation and use of incense (Ex. 30:34-38). David also says in Psalm 140 (141), *“Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice”* (v. 2).

Zechariah the priest was in the temple offering incense when the angel announced to him the news about Saint John the Baptist (Luke 1:4-9). Frankincense was offered as one of the gifts to the Lord by the Wise Men (Matt. 2:11). The offering of incense is also found in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 5, 8).

Incense and Its Symbols

What does incense symbolize?³ First, it is a symbol of our Lord Jesus Christ and His priesthood. For this reason, the Wise Men offered Him frankincense at His birth. Its sweet odor is like the fragrance of the Lord Jesus Christ during His life on earth. *“Because of the fragrance of your good ointments, your name is ointment poured forth; therefore the virgins love you”* (Song 1:3).

The rites and hymns of the Coptic Church also refer to the incense as a type of Christ. In the Hymn of the Censer (†Ϡοϣϣ), we chant, “The golden censer is

the Virgin; her aroma is our Savior.” Also, during the Divine Liturgy, the priest adds incense to the censer and says, “...was incarnate and became man,” symbolizing the coming down of the Lord Jesus Christ (the incense) into the Virgin’s womb (the censer).

Second, the fragrance of incense represents the Church. Saint Paul wrote, *“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing”* (2 Cor. 2:14-15).

Why Do We Raise Incense?

As the aroma and smoke of the incense rises, our prayers, offerings, and confessions are carried up to the throne of God. *“Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand”* (Rev. 8:3-4).

The rising up of the smoke and the aroma of sweet-smelling incense always reminds us of heaven and that our lives should be directed toward eternal life.

The smoke of the incense forms clouds as it rises. The cloud is a sign of the presence of God. *“The LORD said He would dwell in the dark cloud”* (1 Kin. 8:12). Clouds also remind us of our Lord’s second coming. *“They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory”* (Matt. 24:30).

Incense is also offered before the icons of the saints as well as before a bishop when he is present. This is not only a sign of honor and reverence, but also a plea for their intercessions, as incense represents the prayers of the saints.

Seek Him Early

The use of incense throughout the Divine Liturgy lifts our minds and hearts toward God. In the Holy Scriptures, it seems that the use of incense precedes important and dramatic events (e.g. Rev. 8). Likewise, we raise incense before the start of the Divine Liturgy, as well as before key parts of the liturgy including the reading of the Gospel as well as the Institution Narrative, when the bread and wine are blessed in preparation of the descent of the Holy Spirit, Who transforms them into the body and blood of our Lord.

The prayers, hymns, and doxologies raise the hearts of the faithful toward God as they begin their liturgical prayers. In these litanies, we pray for the entire world, thus fulfilling the Lord’s command to pray for one another and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In chanting the doxologies, we also commune with the heavenly Church in remembering the lives of the saints and in asking for their intercessions.

Those who seek the Lord early in attending this service will find Him and will be ready to receive the King in a most intimate and personal way.

¹ The word ‘vespers’ comes from the Latin *vespera* (evening). The word ‘matins’ comes from the Latin *matutinus* (of, or in, the morning).

² Harakas, Stanley S. *The Orthodox Church: 455 Questions and Answers*. Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life Publishing Company, 1987 (162-163).

³ H.G. Bishop Youssef. “Incense.” (www.suscopticdiocese.org)