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## The Smell of Holiness: Incense in the Orthodox Church

Divine Liturgy in the Eastern Orthodox Church is a synaesthetic experience meant to give worshipers a glimpse of “heaven on earth” (Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 270). It exemplifies “what earth would be like if the Fall had not taken place, or what it could be like if everyone lived ‘a life in Christ’ and the senses were ‘deified’” (Kenna, “Why Does Incense Smell Religious?” 12-13). All five sensory pathways—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell—are offered input. The eyes are engaged by vivid icons, flickering candlelight, and the priest’s colorful vestments. The ears are filled with the sound of chanting, singing, and the ringing of bells. Lips brush the surface of icons, and fingers touch forehead, chest, and shoulders as they make the sign of the cross. Taste buds react to the sweetness of the communion wine and the yeasty saltiness of the *prosfero* (altar bread). The nose takes in the aromatic scent of smoldering incense.

All of these aspects of Divine Liturgy are important, but none arouses ecclesiastical feeling more powerfully than incense. “Incense is associated primarily with holy places, settings, and activities, and its smell so powerfully evokes these contexts that it has become a signifier of religious contexts,” writes cultural anthropologist Margaret E. Kenna of Swansea University, Wales (Kenna, “Why Does Incense Smell Religious?” 1).

Eastern Orthodox churches use indirect burning incense. This type of incense is not inherently flammable; rather, it must be heated using charcoal. Combustible incense, usually seen in stick or coil form, is widely used by followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, and traditional Chinese religions, but is never employed in Eastern Orthodox services. (Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 270). A third form of incense, reed diffusion, uses no heat source at all. Instead, essential oils are placed into an opening in a hollow reed and diffuse over the surface area of the reed to release smell. Comparing reed diffusion to other forms of incense is like comparing scented candles to beeswax tapers—a modern development with little or no religious value.

All three forms of incense consist of aromatic biotic materials. In the Orthodox and western traditions, the original ingredients were frankincense and myrrh, resins that have been associated with religious practices for five thousand years. Archaeologists have found evidence of a large-scale frankincense trade dating back to at least 3,000 B.C. The first written account of incense being used for religious purposes appears in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which was written in Mesopotamia circa 2,100 B.C. (Martin, “The History and Meaning of Incense”).

While pre-Judaic incense tended to be pure, unadulterated resin, a mixture of scented components became standard in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Archbishop Christodoulos, “The Offering of Incense”). A recipe and instructions for the usage of incense appear in Exodus 30:34-38:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight: And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy: And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be

unto you most holy. And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the Lord. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.

This passage marks the single most important moment in the history of incense. Not only does it establish a clear precedent for the use of incense in prayer, it also specifies that incense should not be made or used in a non-liturgical context. The inclusion of a precise methodology for making incense may seem peculiar to modern readers, but for the ancient Jews it was highly significant, not only because it provided detailed instruction on how to make a better form of incense, but also because it established a clear differentiation between Pagan and Judaic incenses (Archbishop Christodoulos, “The Offering of Incense”).

The four main ingredients described in Exodus are similar to those used in modern Orthodox production of incense. “Sweet spices” (frankincense resin) is arguably the most universal incense scent. This resin comes from a flowering tree known as *olibanum*. “Stacte” is viscous liquid myrrh. One of the best-known and most widespread miracles associated with Eastern Orthodoxy are weeping icons—images that steadily release liquid myrrh without an apparent source (Pumphrey, “What Are Frankincense and Myrrh?”).

“Onycha” is the most mysterious ingredient, with cryptic meanings in Hebrew and Greek (“tear” and “claw,” respectively). The most likely source is the operculum of sea snails found in the Red Sea. The operculum (“trap door” in Latin) is a hard growth on the soft part of the snail that seals the shell when the snail retracts. Galbanum is a similar gummy substance to myrrh, but is derived from a large flowering plant found in the mountains of present-day Iran (“Biblical Incense Resins & Herbs,” Victorie Inc.)

Modern-day incense is made in a tempering process reminiscent of the one described in Exodus. Most incense used in Orthodox churches is made in the Athonite style. This approach, practiced by the monks of Mount Athos, uses frankincense, various resins (galbanum), and aromatic oils (stacte). The process begins by grinding the frankincense resin into a fine powder. The oils, usually myrrh or a similarly viscous resin, are then added, as are the other resins for scent like galbanum. This mixture is gradually kneaded into a dough, which is rolled into thin snakes and cut into pieces smaller than a pinky fingernail (“Athonite Style Incense,” [orthodoxincense.com](http://orthodoxincense.com)). The process is accompanied by an opening prayer and the Jesus Prayer, maintaining an atmosphere of holiness and solemnity befitting the passage from Exodus.

The cut incense is coated with finely ground fired clay to reduce its stickiness and is left to solidify and mature for at least a month. At month’s end, the incense is dusty and has a consistency similar to the original resin. When placed on burning charcoal, the oils and frankincense produce a white, strong-smelling smoke at a fairly steady rate until the oils are completely burned through. While frankincense is always an ingredient in Athonite incense, it isn’t necessarily the primary scent. If used in large enough quantities, the oils can become the primary smell.

In different parts of the Orthodox world, different aromatic oils are used in lieu of galbanum. Marjoram oil is used on Mount Athos; jasmine is common in the Arabian Peninsula, rose in Bulgaria, amber in Egypt, and lycean myrrh in Syria and Asia Minor. Spikenard or nardos (the scent that Mary Magdalene used when she washed Christ’s feet, and various other flowers like lemon, gardenia, violet, and lilac are also incorporated into Orthodox incense (“Athonite Incense from the Holy Mountain,” [orthodoxincense.com](http://orthodoxincense.com))).

Even though incense was mentioned in Exodus and various other parts of the Old Testament, the early Christians did not use it in Divine Liturgy because of its connection with Pagan and Jewish traditions. Incense would only become a codified feature of the church in the fourth century, when the Emperor and Saint, Constantine the Great, legalized Christianity and brought it into the mainstream. As pagan practices were outlawed, the use of incense in liturgy became a standard practice. The Holy Fathers of Orthodoxy—influential thinkers like Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great—equated incense smoke with the Holy Spirit. “Just as the Holy Spirit is ‘everywhere present and fillest all things,’ the smoke of the censor fills the church with its fragrance” (Martin, “The History and Meaning of Incense”).

Later Orthodox intellectuals have looked beyond the scent of incense to the role of the smoke itself. In an article for the Orthodox Arts Journal, byzantine church architect Andrew Gould credits the gradual increase in the amount of smoke during Divine Liturgy with transforming and mystifying the experience:

We enter a church in the early morning and see it clear and transparent, peaceful and without commotion. It seems small and finite, and we walk from one end to the other in a few paces. But as the liturgy begins, the church fills with sounds and movement, and the air fills with smoke. Gradually, the temple seems larger. As the air grows hazy, the ceiling and iconostasis look more distant and more grand – like mountains miles away. Candles and lamps appear to have haloes – light is no longer invisible as it passes through the air – it has become like a material substance, and the air in the church is saturated with its glow. Sunbeams cascade down from the dome so bright and beautiful that one hesitates to walk through them. They fall upon individual people and icons and we see

them transfigured like Christ Himself (Gould, “Incense – Heavenly Fragrance and Transfigured Light”).

Gould is the latest in a long line of Orthodox thinkers who have found incense smoke to be a source of mysticism and beauty in the church. One of the only references to incense in the New Testament comes in Revelations, the apocalyptic prophecies of Saint John the Theologian written two hundred years before Constantine, during the reign of the pagan Emperor Domitian. St. John describes an angel with a golden censor offering the smoke along with the prayers of the saints before the altar of God (Revelations 8:3-5). This imagery not only equates the incense with saintly prayer, but also suggests that censuring is an essential element of the liturgy.

During Divine Liturgy, censuring is always associated with entering and exiting the altar. The priest is usually chanting a prayer while using the censor, and the smoke is always directed—at the parishioners, at icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary, at the altar, at the Holy Gifts (communion). The aiming of the smoke fits the Revelations equation of incense and saintly prayers, and the diffusion of smoke throughout the church fitting the later parallel with the Holy Spirit. No matter how it is interpreted, the burning of incense plays a crucial role in the service and life of the church, effectively bridging the gap between the senses and spirituality.

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