

## **ANGLICAN ARCANA: Incense**

Have you ever wondered why some churches use incense? The scholar Aidan Kavanagh wrote, “There seems to be no good reason to lavish attention on how a given liturgical event is to engage all the human senses except the olfactory. This sense, it has been pointed out, is perhaps the most subtly influential of them all: it continues to function even during sleep” (*Elements of Rite*, p.62). And that’s the point, really: simply put, we use incense on major feast days to add to the solemnity of the occasion. On these few days only, the worship experience includes sound, sight, taste, touch—and smell. It has nothing whatever to do with vermin or masking odors—nor does history suggest it ever did. Rather, “The use of incense in worship is ancient, certainly predating Christianity. There is no liturgical practice more firmly rooted in scripture than the use of incense; the image of fire and smoke is a common one in the Bible, constantly reminding the reader of scripture of the exodus of Israel from Egypt” (Clayton Morris, in *As We Gather to Pray*, p.142). The incense we use is intended as honorific and devotional: we pay tribute to the clergy and people, and we indicate the holiness of the bread and wine placed on the altar. Incense is among many practices appropriated by Christianity after its establishment as the religion of the Roman Empire, in the fourth century. Processions led by crosses, vested choirs, and formal liturgies in general: these are all inheritances from this period—and innovations from the practice of the early church. (And many practices, including the singing of *Gloria in excelsis* and a corporate confession, are even newer.)

There are, perhaps, two reasons why incense sometimes provokes such a strong response from some worshippers: (1) the sense that it is a “papist” practice, to be avoided by the post-Reformation church, and (2) the reality that the olfactory sense is a powerful one indeed. To the first objection, I wonder why any sensible Anglican would allow this captivity of such a powerful element of liturgical symbolism? Incense is a much rarer phenomenon in the modern Roman church, after all. I, for one, am glad we have done away with the practice of selling indulgences—but I greatly rejoice that we have retained the use of incense! The second objection may be more on point: we smell bread baking, or a particular perfume, or a turkey in the oven, and powerful memories come to our consciousness. I predict that even those caught off guard by early encounters with incense will eventually come to be comforted by the practice. The smell of resin rising from the charcoal will, in time, evoke a powerful sense of feasting, celebrating, and worshipping God in the beauty of holiness. Ω