

“Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the merchant’s fragrant powders?” (Song 3:6)

✠ Lecture VII: On the Use of Incense & Candles ✠

Protestants do not use incense in their prayers considering the raising up of incense an Old Testament practice that was abolished along with the animal sacrifices. Some have mistakenly believed that incense was used in the Old Testament to remove the foul odor of animal sacrifices and therefore, according to them, the use of incense in the New Testament is not justified. In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, discuss the use of incense in both the Old and New Testaments illustrating that it is an independent practice that was not abolished.

Indeed, we read about incense in the Holy Book of Revelation:

- “... the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls **full of incense**, which are the prayers of the saints.” (**Rev 5:8**)
- “Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the alter. He was given **much incense**, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints ... and **the smoke of the incense**, with all the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand.” (**Rev 8:3,4**)

→ Now, this incense mentioned by St. John may be considered some kind of spiritual incense. Nevertheless, it is still incense and the question remains, “why would God allow the use of incense in the Old Testament and in heaven yet abolish it in His Church on earth?”

✠ Incense Between the Old & New Testaments:

God said to Moses the Prophet, “You shall make an alter to burn incense on” (**Ex 30:1**). – Notice that the burning of incense was an independent sacrifice and thus it had an independent alter. – Moreover, God ordered that this alter be overlaid with pure gold, that it would be carried on two poles of wood overlaid with pure gold and be put before the veil where He meets with Moses the Prophet (**Ex 30:3-6**).

God also said, “Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense **every morning**; when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it. And when Aaron lights the lamps **at twilight**, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.” (**Ex 30:7,8**)

When God struck the Israelites with the plague, Moses the Prophet said to Aaron the High Priest, “Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, **put incense on it**, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for the wrath has gone out from the Lord. The plague has begun.” (**Num 16:46**) Notice that the use of incense was independent from the animal sacrifices in this case and was offered to God as a kind of atonement.

God punished Korah, Dathan and Abiram because they dared to offer incense before Him (**Num 16**). Notice here that the offering of incense is more than just a prayer for anyone can offer prayer to the Lord. Nevertheless, prayers have been symbolically called incense (**Ps 141:2**).

God said, “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**) – This is a clear prophecy about the Christian era and the conversion of the Gentiles. Notice that the incense is mentioned as a fundamental corner of the Christian worship and that the pure offering is the Eucharist. It is also interesting to read that frankincense [from which incense is made] was among the gifts that the wise men offered to Lord Jesus Christ (**Mt 2:11**).

✠ Spirituality of Using Incense:

The use of incense, candles, and icons in the Church benefits the children by stimulating their senses and by acting as visual aids for them. Thus connecting them to the spiritual atmosphere of the Church. Moreover, there are many spiritual lessons to be learned from the use of incense:

- Incense reminds us of the Divine words, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.” (**Mt 10:39**) – For as the incense is burnt, it loses its existence, yet it ascends above and reaches heaven.
- Incense also directs our eyes towards heaven reminding us that “here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.” (**Heb 13:4**)
- The sweet aroma of incense reminds us that “we are to God the fragrance of Christ...” (**2 Cor 2:15**)
- The clouds of incense reminds us with God’s presence among us, “a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!’” (**Lk 9:35**)

+ Lights & Candles in the Church:

The Church was likened to a Lampstand, “the seven Lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.” (**Rev 1:20**) The Church is also called the congregation of the faithful about whom it was said; “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (**Mt 13:43**) and our Lord said, “let your light so shine before men ...” (**Mt 5:16**). Moreover, the Church is the house of God and “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (**1 Jn 1:5**). – Thus lighting candles and lamps in the Church reminds us of all the above and it is no surprise to read in the Holy Book of Acts that, “there were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together” (**Acts 20:8**). Likewise, we light candles during the reading of the Holy Gospel because it was written, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (**Ps 119:105**) – We also light candles in front of the icons of saints in accordance with the words of our Lord that the saints are the light of the world (**Mt 5:14**) and to acknowledge that they sacrificed their lives and carried the cross in order to give us light and guidance the same way the candles melt away to give light.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Comparative Theology*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.