

Spirituality of the Raising of Incense

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

More than Preparation

Long before the Divine Liturgy begins, the Church comes together to raise incense. In the Coptic reckoning, the day itself runs from evening to evening, and so every Christian day opens with the Raising of Incense of Vespers and is gathered up, the next morning, by the Raising of Incense of Matins. These two services are not a warm-up for the Liturgy; they are themselves acts of sacrifice. They are the place where the servant first learns to offer his day back to God as a sweet-smelling aroma before the altar, and where the whole congregation is taught, in the quiet rise of the smoke, to entrust its prayer to the one Mediator who offered Himself once for all. This lesson walks through the Raising of Incense at both Vespers and Matins: we trace the shape of the service, listen to the priest's prayers in their original voice, see how the burnt offering of Israel has been fulfilled in the Cross of Christ and taken up into our own worship, watch the censer become the place where the people's confession is gathered, receive the prayer "Efnoti Nai Nan East" that turns us to every quarter of the compass, and see how all of this prepares us, when the Liturgy begins, to meet the Lord Himself upon the altar.

The Shape of the Service

The Coptic day begins at sunset. Our calendar is older than the watches of the Romans; it echoes the evening-and-morning pattern of the first day of creation: "So the evening and the morning were the first day" (Genesis 1:5). The Raising of Incense of Vespers, therefore, is the first act of our Christian day, and the Raising of Incense of Matins the next morning gathers up the night and presents it back to God at its rising.

Both raisings follow the same deliberate sequence. We begin with the Our Father — placing ourselves first, as our Lord Himself taught, before the Face of the Father. We move to the Prayer of Thanksgiving — because every standing before God begins with gratitude. We say the Prayer of Incense during the verses of the Cymbals of Joy, that short hymn of praise which lifts the heart to the altar. We recite the litanies — the Church's ordered intercession for her life, her mysteries, her sick, her dead. We move into the Procession of Incense during the Doxologies, those psalmic hymns by which we praise the Lord and His saints, each doxology carrying the incense a little further around the sanctuary. We sing the Prayers of Mercy. We rise to hear the Gospel. We offer a few short concluding litanies. And we close with the final blessing.

The sequence is not a scaffold to be tolerated until the moment of interest arrives. Every element is itself a moment of interest. The Our Father drops the servant into the place of a child. The Thanksgiving puts his fear in its right proportion. The Prayer of Incense aligns his little offering with the great offering. The Litanies widen his heart beyond his own parish to the whole Church. The Procession carries the pleading upward as the smoke rises. The Gospel opens the mouth of the Lord Himself above us. The blessing sends us out different from the way we came in. A servant who has learned to pray inside this shape has learned to pray.

The Prayer of Incense — Vespers and Matins

At Vespers, the priest leads the congregation with the words that rise from an older memory of the Song of Songs itself: “O Christ our God, the great, awesome, and true, the only-begotten Son and Logos of God the Father, ‘ointment poured forth is Your holy name’ (Song of Songs 1:3), and in every place incense is offered to Your holy name, and a pure sacrifice.” The deacon then calls the people into the offering: “Pray for our sacrifice, and those who have brought it.” And the priest continues: “We ask You, O our Master, receive our prayers to Yourself. Let our prayers be set forth before You as incense, the lifting up of our hands the evening sacrifice. For You are the true evening sacrifice, who has offered Yourself upon the honored Cross for our sins, according to the will of Your good Father; with whom You are blessed, with the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, who is of one essence with You, now and at all times and unto the age of all ages. Amen.”

At Matins, the priest begins with a different passafe, reaching back through the whole history of sacrifice: “O God, who received to Yourself the offerings of the righteous Abel, the sacrifice of Noah and Abraham, and the incense of Aaron and Zachariah.” The deacon responds with the same call: “Pray for our sacrifice, and those who have brought it.” And the priest concludes: “Receive to Yourself this incense at the hands of us sinners, as a sweet savor of incense unto the remission of our sins, and of the rest of Your people. For blessed and full of glory is Your holy name, O Father and Son and Holy Spirit, now and at all times and unto the age of all ages. Amen.”

The two prayers are a pair. At Vespers, we name Christ Himself as the “true evening sacrifice” offered upon the Cross; at Matins, we thread our poor offering into the long thread of every offering the Father has ever received — Abel’s lamb, Noah’s ark-altar, Abraham’s son on the mountain, Aaron’s golden censer, Zachariah’s morning incense in the Holy Place (Luke 1:9). The priest, according to the ancient rite preserved by Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar in the fourteenth century, prayed these prayers aloud, that the whole congregation might pray them with him. There was, in Ibn Kabar’s day, a period in which the Church insisted that the Raising of Incense be prayed daily in every parish, regardless of whether a Liturgy was to follow. The Church’s wisdom here is worth keeping: the servant’s day is held up in offering to God every morning and every evening, whether or not there is anything else to celebrate.

Incense and the Burnt Offering: the Old Testament Root

To understand what the Church is doing when she raises incense, we must return to the worship of Israel. In Numbers chapters 28 and 29, the Lord commanded Moses the whole rhythm of the sacrifice of His people: the burnt offering, the grain offering, and the drink offering, to be presented twice every

day, every morning and every evening; on every Sabbath; at the beginning of every month; and on every great feast of the year — Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Day of Atonement.

The pattern was relentless, because the Father's care for His people was relentless. He did not want them to drift from Him even the span of a morning without being drawn back by offering. The servant who learns the Psalms learns this same pattern: “My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up” (Psalm 5:3); “Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Psalm 141:2). Incense in the morning; incense in the evening; the whole day between, held in the hand of the God who does not want His people to wander.

Are the burnt offerings of Israel still mandated? Yes, and no. Yes, because the pattern is the Father's pattern; a daily offering, morning and evening. No, because the substance has been fulfilled. “For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart — these, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:16–17). And so the Apostle names the substance: “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). The book of Hebrews draws the line at its sharpest: “Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God... For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:11–14).

The burnt offering is Christ Himself. The daily rhythm of incense, which we still keep every morning and every evening, no longer supplies what He has once supplied forever; it unites our own hearts, in thanksgiving and contrition, with that one offering on the Cross. As St. Paul writes, “Walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Ephesians 5:2). Poured out, as a drink offering, which during the sacrifices, were poured in their entirety. We are presenting Christ as the ultimate burnt offering, and inside Him, we are presenting ourselves, poured out in our entirety.

The Altar of Incense and the Cross of Christ

In the tabernacle and the temple of Israel, two altars stood. The altar of burnt offering stood in the outer court, where the animal sacrifices were consumed in fire. Farther in, inside the Holy Place, just before the veil of the Holy of Holies, stood the golden altar of incense. Only after the worshipper had brought his sacrifice, and only after the priest had been purified at the bronze laver, did the incense rise before the veil. The smoke of the incense was the sign that the sacrifice had been accepted — the prayer of the forgiven ascending into the presence of the Lord.

The pattern held its shape into the age of the Apocalypse. St. John saw it in heaven: “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” (Revelation 8:3–4). The incense of our Church is joined, in the eye of faith, with the incense of the altar before the

throne. The smoke that rises from our censer passes through the roof of our parish into the vision the beloved disciple saw.

And between our censer and that golden altar is the one event that makes the whole connection possible: the Cross of Christ. The offering of incense in the Church symbolizes, above all else, the offering of our Lord upon the Cross. The fire that consumes the resin was His love; the resin that is consumed was His Body; the sweet smoke that rises is His prayer and ours rising together to the Father. To raise the incense in the Church is to remember the Cross, and to offer our own repentant selves inside it.

The Procession of Incense: Confession Gathered and Offered

During the Procession of Incense, the priest walks the sanctuary with the censer, tracing along the way the sign of the infinity — the horizontal eight — a small and quiet icon of the eternal life into which we are being drawn. The path is never a straight line; it folds back upon itself, because the life he is teaching us to pray into has no beginning and no end.

As he moves, the people are quietly doing what the Old Testament worshipper did when he brought his animal to the altar: they are confessing their sins. In Leviticus the offerer laid his hand upon the head of the sacrifice and confessed his sins there (Leviticus 16:21); in the Raising of Incense, the congregation lays its sins upon the incense, which is itself a symbol of the Lamb. This is why, when the priest returns to the altar, he prays: “O God, who, while on the honored Cross, accepted the confession of the thief, accept also the confession of Your people, and forgive them all their sins, for the sake of Your holy name which is called upon us; according to Your mercy, O Lord, and not according to our sins.” The confession of the thief was accepted by Christ on the Cross; the confession of the people is accepted by the same Christ on the altar.

The priest, in a sense, has gathered the sins of the people into the censer, just as the Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He carries them, in the incense, to the altar. There — at the threshold of what is about to become the Divine Liturgy — they are laid upon the Body who bore them first on the Cross.

“He Instituted for Us the Great Mystery”

When the Liturgy itself comes, the incense returns one more time, at the most pivotal moment of the whole celebration: the Consecration, or the Institution Narrative. The priest incenses his own hands three times, and three times he carries the incense in his hands to the holy bread. With each approach he says, “He instituted for us the great mystery of godliness.” On the third round, he also carries the incense above the chalice, and after censuring the chalice he adds, “For He was determined to give Himself up for the life of the world.”

This is not a flourish. The priest's hands, like the censer he carried in the Procession, have gathered the confession of the people; he has held that confession over the bread and wine that are about to become the very Body and Blood of the Lord who carries our sins. The incense, the priest's hands, and the Lord Himself are brought into one gesture of offering. The Apostle's words pass over our

understanding here: “Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (Philippians 2:17); “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand” (2 Timothy 4:6).

“He has not said of my sacrifice; but, what is much more, of my being poured out. For the whole of the sacrifice was not offered to God, but the whole of the drink-offering was.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homily on 2 Timothy 4

St. John Chrysostom teaches us here a small but important thing. The whole of a sacrifice is not always given to God — a portion of the animal is burned, a portion is shared in the meal of the priests and the offerers. But the whole of the drink offering, poured out upon the sacrifice, goes up in steam and is consumed. To be poured out as a drink offering is to give oneself without remainder, every drop, nothing reserved. This is what the incense of Vespers and Matins, properly understood, is teaching us every single day — to be poured out with Christ, on top of Christ, every evening and every morning until there is nothing left to reserve.

“Efnoti Nai Nan”: Toward the Lord

At a certain moment in the Raising of Incense, the priest turns to face each of the four directions, and the people turn with him in their hearts. This little rite, called by its Coptic opening words “Efnoti Nai Nan” — “O God, have mercy upon us” — is one of the richest in the whole service, because in the space of a few seconds it gathers up the whole posture of the servant before God.

We begin facing the East — toward the altar, toward the rising sun, toward the Lord who is Himself the Dayspring. We plead: “God have mercy upon us, settle mercy upon us, have compassion upon us.” This is the first word of every Christian prayer: Kyrie eleison. Before anything else is asked, mercy is asked.

Then the priest turns to the North — in the older reading of the compass, the direction of rejection and of cold. The prayer becomes: “Hear us.” We plead for the Lord to listen to us in spite of all the coldness of our own hearts, all the moments when we ourselves have refused to hear Him. Then he turns West — toward the congregation, toward the whole people of God gathered behind him. The prayer is: “Bless us.” We ask the blessing for everyone in the nave, for the whole Church stretching outward from it. Then he turns South — the direction, in older geographies, of strength and of steady light. The prayer is: “Keep us.” We ask the mighty hand of the Lord to hold us in His keeping.

And then the priest turns back to the East, closing the circle where it began. The prayer with which he closes is the fullness of what has been unfolding: “Take away Your anger from us, visit us with Your salvation, and forgive us our sins.” Every direction has been asked; the Lord has been placed over every horizon of our life. Then we stand facing Him again — the same Lord at whose feet we first began — and ask, last of all, that His salvation be visited upon us and that our sins be forgiven. The servant who grows up praying this rite has learned that the Lord is not in one direction of our lives but in all of them.

Living the Raising of Incense

All of this is easy to pass over. The service is short; the hymns are familiar; the incense is quiet. But if we will let it, the Raising of Incense will form our whole life in small and lasting ways. It will teach us to begin the day with the Lord's Prayer in our mouth and to end it the same way. It will teach us to thank before we ask. It will teach us that our own little daily offering is acceptable to God only because it is laid upon the one offering of the Lord Jesus Christ. It will teach us to confess often, quietly, without drama, as the incense rises. It will teach us to let the priest's hand be lifted over us, and to receive the Lord's blessing in every direction of our lives.

A servant who will attend the Raising of Incense faithfully, weekday as well as weekend, will find that his own heart becomes, slowly, a little like the censer — warm, quiet, its smoke rising, its fire kept by another hand. He will find himself poured out, drop by drop, as the drink offering upon the daily sacrifice of Christ.

May the Lord, who is Himself the true morning and evening sacrifice, accept our incense every day of our lives. May He receive us, with Abel and Noah and Abraham and Aaron and Zachariah, into the long communion of those who have brought an offering of contrite love. And may the smoke of our prayer, in our own generation, rise with the prayer of all the saints upon the golden altar which is before His throne — now, and at all times, and unto the age of all ages. Amen.



Review Questions

1. Describe the structure of the service. (A: We say "Our Father," the Thanksgiving prayer, the prayer of incense during the verses of Cymbals of Joy, we recite the litanies; next comes the procession of incense during Doxologies, then mercy prayers, followed by the holy Gospel, a few short litanies, and finally, the conclusion of the service.)
2. How was incense used in the Old Testament? (Sample A: After the person raises the incense and offers the animal sacrifices on the altar of burnt offering, and was purified in the basin, he was then able to pray to God who had accepted his prayers as a sweet savor upon the altar of incense.)
3. Which verse did St. John Chrysostom speak on, regarding this topic? (A: 2 Timothy 4:6)
4. True or false? Vespers and Matins are not meant to be prayed out loud. (A: False)
5. True or false? Our Lord is essentially the ultimate sacrifice. (A: True)



Books & References

Scripture: Genesis 1:5 • Exodus 30 • Leviticus 16:21 • Numbers 28–29 • Psalm 5:3; 51:16–17; 141:2 • Song of Songs 1:3 • Luke 1:9 • John 1:29 • 1 Corinthians 5:7 • Ephesians 5:2 • Philippians 2:17 • 2 Timothy 4:6 • Hebrews 10:11–14 • Revelation 8:3–4

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Divine Liturgy (Introduction).
- Abu I-Barakat Ibn Kabar, Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah (The Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service).
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy (especially Homily on 2 Timothy 4).
- Fr. Athanasius Iskander, [Understanding the Liturgy](#).
- Fr. Tadros Malaty, The Divine Liturgy: An Introduction.
- https://www.suscopts.org/ssc/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/01-Raising_of_Incense.pdf

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.