



**DIOCESE OF TYLER**  
**Sacred Liturgy – Uses and Practices - Guide**

**Incense in the Sacred Liturgy**

1. One of the most distinctive physical characteristics of Catholic worship is the burning of incense during Mass on Sundays, Holy Days, and within Eucharistic Adoration. The use of incense during the sacred liturgy is rooted in Sacred Scripture. In the Old Testament, Moses built an altar of incense (Ex 30) on which the sweetest spices and gums were burned. The office of daily renewal was entrusted to a special branch of the Levitical tribe (1 Chr 9:29). In the New Testament, the Christ Child received the gift of frankincense from one of the Magi (Mt 2:11), an allusion to the divinity of Jesus. One passage that indicates the early Church was familiar with incense is the vision of St. John the Evangelist of the heavenly liturgy: *Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne. The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel* (Revelation 8:3-4).
2. In the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite, the priest has the option to use or not use incense at any Mass. Incense can be used to raise awareness of the solemnity of a particular Sunday or feast day. According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) 276, incensation may take place at the following times during Mass:
  - A. During the Entrance procession;
  - B. At the beginning of Mass, to incense the cross and the altar;
  - C. At the Gospel procession and the proclamation of the Gospel itself;
  - D. After the bread and the chalice have been placed upon the altar, to incense the offerings, the cross, and the altar, as well as the priest and the people;
  - E. At the showing of the host and the chalice after the consecration.
3. According to GIRM 277, the priest puts incense in the thurible and blesses it with the sign of the Cross without saying anything. Before and after incensation, a profound bow is made to the person or object being incensed, except for the altar and the offerings. There are three swings for the incensation of the Most Blessed Sacrament, the offerings, the altar cross, the *Book of the Gospels*, the Paschal Candle, the priest, and the people. When the priest incenses the offerings, he does so with three swings of the thurible or by making the sign of the Cross over the offerings with the thurible before going on to incense the cross and the altar.