

HOLY SMOKE

**FROM INCENSE TO
SWEETGRASS**



"My sister became a Bible Christian and tells us that she is 'born again'. Last week, Dad got sick and she went home to visit him. When she saw him praying with sweetgrass, she threw it into the fire. She told him that using sweetgrass was wrong, and that it wasn't....."

...in the bible. Dad's pretty upset and I just don't know what to think."

This story was told to me by a friend on the reserve. What had happened had disturbed her deeply. Could we Catholics use these kind of things or not, she wanted to know. Does the Bible really forbid it?

OUR CATHOLIC PRACTICE

We Catholics have always used the things of the earth to help us in a spiritual way. We use all kinds of things: oil, ashes, salt, palms, pictures, statues, candles and on and on.

THE REASON WHY

This is basic. We believe the invisible God reached out to us in Jesus. He, whom no eye can see, became for us a human being, made out of the dust of the earth. This is how God comes to rescue us. There is a basic truth here. God uses the stuff of the earth to bring us healing and salvation. We do it because God did it first.

THE SACRAMENTALS

Certain things that we use in a spiritual way we call *sacramentals*. They can be things like wedding rings, holy water, and crucifixes or even actions like making the sign of the cross or kneeling (etc.).

NOT SACRAMENTS

These are in some way connected to the seven great *Sacraments* and yet they are very different. Sacraments have power in themselves. Sacramentals have only the power that the prayer of the Church, and our own faith give them.

WHAT GOOD ARE THEY?

They convey to us certain truths of faith. Sacramentals focus our minds on spiritual realities. They help us to express what is in our hearts. They can create an atmosphere to help us enter more deeply into prayer and worship.

A BIBLICAL PRACTICE

The Catholic practice of using incense is based solidly on both the Bible and long Christian tradition. God is the author of it's use. He does nothing uselessly, and if you ridicule the practice, you ridicule God.

PAGAN ORIGINS

Catholics are often told, "But , these things are of pagan origin. They were used in the worship of false gods and demon spirits. The Romans blessed water and offered incense to idols. That's why you should stay away from them."

We have to say, "Yes, it's true, many of these signs have been common to the whole human race and sometimes people have used them wrongly."

CHRIST THE LORD

There is a reason why Christians feel free to adopt these things to their own use. It is that really, they all belong to - Jesus Christ!

Think about it. He is Lord of all creation. Not only that, scripture says that Jesus is the true source of everything that is, (Rev 3:14) and that "*through him all things came into being, and not one thing came to be except through him.*" (Jn 1:3) All things display his handiwork. It is only fitting to use them to honor him.

OUR CULTURES

When the Nations turn to Christ and accept him, he reclaims and purifies all the good things of their cultures as well. Evil things he begins to crowd out of the picture. We begin to see that some of our most cherished customs find their true meaning in him. Some have reached their fulfilment and slowly fade away. Others find a new home in his Church, making richer this great family of faith.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS !

So what about this holy smoke? In the Old Testament God commands that incense be offered to him everyday. (Ex 30:1-8)

David, that great Hebrew king, compares his own prayer to this fragrant smoke.

*“Let my prayer rise like
incense before you.
The lifting of my hands
I like the evening offering.”* (Ps 141)

God, through the prophet Malachi, who lived centuries before Jesus, foretold what would happen when the Christ would come:

*“From the rising to the setting of the sun
my name shall be honored
among the Nations, and in every
place incense shall be offered
to my name, and a pure offering too,
since my name shall be honored
among the Nations.”* (Mal 1:11-12)

Among Catholics of every nation incense is indeed offered to the Lord, and the ‘pure offering’ too, which is the Holy Mass, at all times and in every land.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When the angel Gabriel brings the first word we hear of the coming Savior it is at the altar of incense and at the time of the evening offering. (Lk 1:8-12)

In the book of Revelations we see the angels in heaven doing what the Church on earth also does in it's worship:

“Another angel, who had a golden censer came and stood at the altar. A large quantity of incense was given to him to offer with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar that stood in front of the throne. And so from the angel 's hand, the smoke of the incense went up, and with it the prayers of the saints..” (Rev 8:3-4)

A LAST WORD

So as you see this holy smoke rising up and filling our Catholic places of worship, may it call to your mind the presence and beauty of our God, who fills all of Creation. And, may your own prayers rise up with it.

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HOLY SMOKE

Fragrant smoke is one of these sacramentals. It has been used by peoples all over the world for thousands of years. Sweet grass, sage and cedar (etc.) are forms of incense found in many First Nations cultures. It is used as a way of honoring the Creator, as a sign of prayer rising to God, and of the sweetness of prayer. It is a sign of humility (the humbleness of plants) and purity (the purifying effect of fire). Also for Christians, a reminder of the shining cloud that veils the glory of God.

BUT, WAIT A MINUTE !

Some Bible Christians see all these signs as being useless at best and from the devil at worst. They tell us that God doesn't need this stuff and we don't either. We should just put our faith in Jesus , stick to the Bible, and forget the rest.

Israelite incense burners from the time of King Solomon



WHAT JESUS DID

But, when we turn to the Bible, we see Jesus himself using the humble things of the earth to convey meaning and power and healing. Water is used to baptise and oil to heal. In the Gospel of John (9:6) he even spits on some dirt, makes it into a paste, and rubs it on the blind mans eyes to heal them. Why, when a word would have been enough ?

He uses ordinary things in still greater ways, changing bread and wine into his own Body and Blood, as the greatest gift of all.