

Why is Incense Used in the Greek Orthodox Church

Written by [Andrew Athanasiou](#) in [Religion](#)



We find the use of incense as far back as the Old Testament, such as Psalm 141:2, “Let my prayer be set forth before you as incense; and the lifting up of my hands be as an evening sacrifice.” In Malachi 1:11, it says, “...and in every place incense is going to be offered to my name.” Much of our worship comes from the Hebrew rites and traditions established before Christ, including the reading of Psalms (which are in every service of the Orthodox Church), incense, chanting, and much more. Incense is made from aromatic plant matter, (the good smelling plant parts) and a binding agent to hold it together, either oil or resin.

It's hard to believe, but there was a time without regular showering and forced air ventilation. Back in the day churches would start to smell foul and incense was used to help freshen the air inside the church. In fact, many of the things we do in Church have both practical and spiritual understandings. A censer is the “tool” that we use in the church to get the smoke and the smell to the people. The most common censers are gold and have four chains, standing for the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), who wrote the four gospels that we have in the Bible. It also usually has twelve bells for the 12 Apostles, who were the closest of the followers of Jesus and the main people who spread the Word of God. Inside of the Censer, we place a piece of charcoal and on top of the charcoal we place incense. The fragrant smoke that is produced reminds us of our prayers rising to God while the gold censer resembles a church and helps us remember to pray. These golden censers also remind us of Christmas (the Nativity of the Lord), where the Magi (aka the 3 Kings) gave Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh as frankincense is a commonly used incense.

We cense a lot of things. We cense the Holy Altar because we consider it the Throne of God, as Communion (body and blood of Christ) is consecrated on it. We cense icons to honor and bless them. We cense the people because we are called to be saints, and like the saints, we were made in the image of God and also the temple of the Holy Spirit. We even cense the bodies of the departed. We cense to show that all of those things are in union, that God has blessed them all in heaven and on earth. According to the tradition of the Church, if a priest or deacon is serving Orthros, he will cense not only the icons, but

also even walk through the Church, censuring everyone and everything. This is also typically done in other services as well, but why is incense used in the Greek Orthodox Church? <http://www.greekboston.com/religion/incense/>
Orthros is probably the most common, and usually takes place an hour before Liturgy begins. (Go and check it out, if you haven't seen it before.)

The Orthodox Church's worship is to engage the human person, in body and soul. In body, we see icons; hear chanting; feel oil, bread, and wine; taste bread, wine, water; and smell incense. Censers are also made for the home, where people and families can cense their homes to remind us that it is God who blessed us with these things and that we offer them back to him in the forms of what we do with our homes.

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This post was written by Andrew Athanasiou

Andrew is a student of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, located in Brookline, Massachusetts. Andrew is a Masters of Divinity Student who is also a Seminarian. Andrew is from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and his knowledge comes from five major sources: Greek Orthodox Seminary; Greek Orthodox Summer Camp; both being taught and teaching in Greek Orthodox Sunday School; and finally further readings and interests in other theological areas.