

Chapter iii: *Smoking at High Mass*

HERE'S A MOTIONLESS IMAGE to contemplate: four men and perhaps a boy in a huddle around a machine. One man, who is holding it up, is in a long black dress and a white pinafore,; the boy is dressed the same way. The other three men are in bright green smocks over white shifts. Even in this unmoving picture – an oil-painting, with the colours laid on thick and brilliant – you see the intensity of what's happening – whatever it is. They stand at perfect right angles to each other, the boy with his exotic silver-gilt canister a little to the side; all gaze at the dangling contraption; and the green figure on the left moves his lips as he manipulates a small silver spoon.

Recall where we are. We've reached the point in the Mass when the congregation have finished offering God their Introit hymn, and choir have begun the Introit proper; when the three sacred ministers have at last reached the altar (after rich and various ceremonies of approach); and the celebrant is about to begin singing out the prayers that will lead, through the Kyrie and the Gloria, to the Collect of the day. Then everyone will sit down, pressure will be relaxed for a while, and the 'ministry of the Word' will begin.

But as yet we are still preparing this place and this time, as well as ourselves, for the great interchange of worship, and the mood is of rising exaltation. Having arrived at the stone block where God reveals Himself, and feeds us, the ministers of the Mass are about to hallow it: to honour its holiness. And the mechanism for doing this (strangely? but no more

strangely than the brine we've already used, or the Bread and Wine that lie ahead) is smoke.

The frozen scene we are considering, which is going to stay frozen for some pages, is of the ministers and servers 'making smoke'. That's servers' slang – how they refer to it among themselves out in the locker-room called the sacristy. More formally, it's the action of 'imposing incense.' We're going to meditate on this imaginative use of smoke for some pages, pondering what and why it is, before re-starting the action to see what is done with it. In our next chapter we'll consider the sounds being made in the background by the choir – although the choir's music at this point, their Introit anthem, is really the foreground, and the smoking the backdrop.

First a warning. By the universal tradition of the Church for twenty centuries, the servers at Mass are laymen; laymen are men, men are in part still boys, and boys love a certain sort of machine. So clergy and servers are a tad more enthusiastic about the *mechanics* of incense – being allowed to make sparks and swing burning heavy pots about – than they would be if they had steadier characters. You may find the next installment over-excited, for which I apologise.

By gum

SOUTHERN ASIA, WHERE CHRISTIANITY began, is hot and smelly. There also happen to be lots of spices there, and trees (particularly the terebinth), of which the aromatic sap can be dried and powdered. Therefore the habit is and always has been to **perfume rooms**, particularly around meal-times, by burning resin and spice. Among the ancient Jews, for instance, with their particular stress on cleanliness, incense was so universal that the Sabbath meal was marked out by *not* burning incense, because of the prohibition on unnecessary work on that day. Since the Last Supper, the first Mass, was on a Thursday, it follows that the Upper Room would almost certainly have been perfumed with smouldering tree-gum.

Moreover: incense, like candles, could be burned in a **religious fashion** as well as domestic one. All ancient religions in that part of the

world burned incense to the gods, partly because, in that hot, still climate, smoke rises as a pillar into the blue vault, making invisible prayer visible; and partly because incense blunted the stench of the bloody sacrifices offered on the same (outdoor) altars. Judaism was not an exception. The Temple in Jerusalem, which must have smelt like an slaughterhouse, had a huge golden altar of incense. There, as it happens, the story of Christ begins, with John the Baptist's father performing in peaceful solitude the usual evening smoke-offering to God, until in the vapour appears a sudden angel, heralding the Herald (Luke i^{3#}).

Holy smoke

THE FIRST CHRISTIANS were not bigots, and knew that Judaism and the pagan religions were not flatly false but merely unfinished: the faith of Christ completed what these lesser faiths only dimly grasped. The **early Church** did not have the impulse (invented much later by Protestantism) to affect not to be entirely different: to effect to be *a religion*. Without inhibition the apostolic Christians took over whatever was good in faiths Jewish and Greek. Because prayer was universally offered amidst columns of sweet-smelling smoke, as well as because feasts were universally held in perfumed rooms, the Eucharistic feast was kept with incense. When St John the Divine pictured Paradise, he naturally included angels with incense-burners (Revelation viii³⁻⁵), because that is how prayer is offered to God, by those who know Him as by those far off.

All this smoke-making would have been done in fixed burners, probably on stands, like standard lamps. (These are still occasionally used in church: I've seen one operated at a wedding by a server, perhaps enjoying himself too much, who stood crossed-armed and moody by his brazier, intermittently snatching up a fistful of incense grains to dash them into the blazing bowl, which sizzled and emitted a huge puff: purple, billowing, sparking. This seemed to me a bit Hollywood.)

An incensational development

A THIRD USE OF INCENSE in the ancient world, apart from domestic fumigation, and as an extension of its use in religious sacrifice, was as reverence made visible: a **mark of honour** paid to human lords. Raw incense, unlit would do, incense in the form of dried gum: golden-brown lumps, rather like unrefined sugar. This is how the Magi offered the infant Christ *frankincense* (which simply means *exceedingly fine incense*). But eventually the ancients, with their usual energetic inventiveness, came up with a portable incense-burner that let them offer the smoke of incense specifically, to an individual. It was a double-chambered affair on a four-fold chain. A metal pot with a grille on it hung from three of the chains; the fourth chain attached to the domed lid, elegantly pierced with holes. Coals were lit and dropped on the grille, incense was sprinkled on the coals, the ash fell through the grille and didn't smother the flame, and by lifting and lowering the domed top one could control the ventilation and keep it smoking nicely. The chains meant you could swing it and 'place' the smoke fairly precisely. I hope I'm making the workings of this device clear. Its apparatus is, like all good machines, at once simple and subtle.

These portable burners are called, in Anglo-Saxon, censers, or, more Latinately, **thuribles** (from *thus*, Latin for incense). At the Roman and Byzantine imperial courts, thuribles created the ceremony of incensation, or **censing**: emperors and high officials had incense 'offered' to them as a sign of veneration. In other words, some underling would swing a thurible toward the grandee, and a puff of scented smoke would rise before him, a breath of odorous honour – or two **swings** and two puffs, if he were particularly important; or even three.

At some point the early Church stopped burning incense in stationery bowls, and adopted for its worship thuribles and what went with thuribles, the rite of honouring people (the priest and congregation) and things (such as the Gospel book, altar, Bread and Wine) by censing them. We don't know even what century this occurred, and we don't know precisely why, but I suggest it was partly the irresistible boyish thrill a server feels at having a blazing pot to swing about.

Regard the mural above the High Altar, with its seven saints beneath the Ascending Christ. Number seven, the chap on the far right, is austere young **Vincent**, who served at the altar of his local church in Valencia, and is patron saint of servers (although we might want to associate with him John Thalgieh, seventeen year-old altar-boy, aspirant priest, and by all accounts an agreeable chap, murdered at the door of the church he served, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, by Zionist invaders on 20 October, 2001). In A.D. 303 the Empire had one last bash at wiping out the Church: the dead included, in Rome, Agnes (second from the left); in Britain, Alban (number five); and in Spain Vincent himself. He was heinously burned on a gridiron; a mysterious raven kept watch over his body – hence his symbols. He wears, because he was a deacon, a dalmatic – the distant ancestor of the dalmatic Fr Dawson is wearing at this very instant (I should have mentioned this two chapters back, when I was describing the dalmatic). And in his left hand Vincent holds an (archæologically correct) ancient thurible, which he is pretending not to be pleased about. But anyone who has ever served at the altar can see through their patron’s faraway expression. Vincent is having fun.

Seventeen centuries later, and directly below his feet, in our present freeze-frame, another, very similar, thurible is being ‘charged’ with incense by the celebrant. The moment the altar is kissed the **thurifer**, the server who carries the thurible, steps up. The deacon in his dalmatic has taken the incense ‘boat’ (so-called because it is shaped like a boat) from the ‘boat-boy’ (so-called because he carries it about). The thurifer has pulled the central chain up, exposing the burning coals. (Out in the sacristy is a tiny barbecue, on which the thurifer has lit these hollow coals so that they smoulder, burning without visible flame.) The celebrant is spooning the aromatic gum out of the unlidded boat onto the coals – three spoonfuls, in honour of the Blessèd Trinity – and as he does so says this magnificent, laconic prayer: *Be blessed ✠ in the Name of Him in Whose honour thou shalt burn.* At once, up rises a gray translucent shifting column.

Protestant error, uncensored

YOU'LL HAVE NOTICED that I've been almost defensive about the use of incense: laying on far more history than is usual in these notes to show that incense is a natural, a Biblical, an apostolic, an almost inevitable part of Christian worship.

I've done this because incense is what particularly shocks people who are dismayed by ritual worship. They're more horror-struck by 'smells and bells' than by anything else in Catholic liturgy. I don't know why – is it the boyish high-spirits that (I admit) go with that blazing gadget? Or is it more profound a loathing? Are they in fact on to something?

Consider this symptom of distaste: the Protestant Frankincense Cough, a psychosomatic or (as we used to say) hysterical phenomenon. People who disapprove of incense often respond like Pavlov's dogs to the dinner-bell. I, way up in the sanctuary of my last parish, could merely hold up an unlit thurible, for one dear soul, thirty yards away, to hack and retch as if gassed. Her Scotch blood, perhaps: she only had to see an incense-machine to think of popery (rather than *pot-pourri*), and she couldn't think of popery without gagging on the thought of Inquisitions, idolatry of false bones, pyres at Smithfield, Armadas, papal concubines, Jesuit assassins – and of Galileo, mocking Abbés in powdered periwigs, salacious nuns, the Provisional Irish Republican Army bombing schools –

What was her pathology? Why object to the *smells* of the Mass so much, when there is (you would think) so much else for a Protestant to object to? This, I think: the smoke of incense is proof, not to be misunderstood, that the Mass is not simply a prayer service, not an internal matter of feeling close to Jesus, not a vain display of tokens, not an attempt at enhancing psychological states. The Mass, unless it is a fraud, is about material realities. We can misconstrue gestures and words, misreading them as mere symbolism. But when literal smoke goes literally curling up into the air, no one can miss the point: the Mass claims to be about physical fact. This is not folklore, nor edifying recreation for morally earnest persons. This is, as much as any pagan

religion ever was, an actual religion. We are offering incense to Heaven. We are adoring a material Presence. We are making Sacrifice.

That dear old soul in my last parish was, given her prejudices, right to choke. It's the fuming thurible that makes the materialism of the Mass clear. She was not a Catholic, and so the immense doctrine of the material Presence scandalised her (as it should: she was no fool). The thurible outraged her sensibilities, its existence stuck in her throat, so she hugely coughed. For nothing's more blatantly Catholic than this heavy chained pot. In terms of sensibility, its smoke is the solidest thing in our rite.

Incense and sensibility

HOW SERIOUS A BUSINESS incense is! I've rambled a bit, swirling about and eddying like hazy smoke, multiplying data about thurifers and thuribles so that you may have got lost. But I hope we can emerge from the haze and see that censuring is not just a charming liturgical fidget. It is moving and truthful. There is a *theology* of smoke.

Mass is the offering up to God of what is utterly better than anything else on earth: the divine Body and Blood of the Son of God, much the best Thing we could conceivably have to give Him: the one acceptable gift. We hold that Offering up amidst smoke, for smoke, too, rises, and this smoke is fragrant, as the Sacrifice is fragrant: acceptable to God, delicious, *containing in Itself all sweetness* (as a splendid old versicle declares).

Burned incense has been for thousands of years the universal sign of man's cry to Heaven, and Catholic Christianity is not snobbish. We acknowledge the *continuum* between the one complete faith and all those earlier faiths. The pagans had priests offering incense and sacrifice at altars: well, why shouldn't we use the same vocabulary of gesture? If this is truly a *religion*, then it ought literally to offer incense. If Catholicism is seriously a *cultus*, then it ought to make the seriously cultic gesture of ceaselessly renewing and ceaselessly consuming the perfumes of Arabia before its God. How else could we perform our

exuberance, except by immolation: religiously destroying pungent resin, blessed in the Name of Him in Whose honour it burns?

Indeed, the gesture of incense-burning happens to be *more* intensely religious for us than it was for the ancients, since we're not much given to domestic, secular use of the stuff. To fortunate us, therefore, the heady smell of charred aromatic gum and the heady sight of the sanctuary filling with odoriferous fog (candle-flames blurring in murk, golden light mingling in swirl, ministers in their bright robes swimming through it rapt) fall on our senses with an almost sacramental power. This, we feel, is a premonition of Paradise; and in the supreme moment of the Mass, when our altar and the eternal Altar of Heaven meld into one, this larger blessing is recited over the thurible:

*Through the intercession of Blessed Michael the Archangel
standing at the right hand of the altar of incense,
and of all His elect, may the Lord vouchsafe to bless ✠
this incense, and to receive it for a sweet-smelling savour.*

There eternally Holy Michael, but for the Virgin Mary the highest personality God has made, stands at his brazier, annihilating that inexhaustible subtle solid before that Presence which has never ceased to awe even Michael. And we appear for a moment with the Archangel, our Sacrifice acknowledged acceptable in that bright company, the savour of our Offering is smelt in Paradise.

Drunk on smoke

I'M SPEAK SENSUOUSLY because the Mass is meant to be sensuous. It possesses, to the point of overwhelming, intellect, imagination, emotion. It wants to overwhelm the senses too. All the other senses honour God's presence in the Mass – hearing exults in the best music; sight exults at sparkling silver, blazing hues and ordered movement; touch revels at cool linen, jagged silver, watery silk, amiable velvet; taste, at the climax of the sensational Mass, is dizzy with wine. There would be deficiency if smell, the most evocative of the five, were left out of this

roistering of the senses, a roistering which is not a blunting but a quickening.

Soul of Christ, sanctify me: Body of Christ, save me: Blood of Christ, inebriate me, runs a classic post-communion prayer, the *Anima Christi* (it's printed on the back of the red Massbooks we use at Ascension and St Agnes). At the Lambeth Conference of 1980 the world's Anglican bishop, awfully arrayed in their thousands, reluctantly disapproved the practice, then universal in the Church of Malawi, of mingling in the thurible frankincense with marijuana. The problem was simply that marijuana is (rightly or wrongly) illegal, and the Church ought not habitually to flout the law. But the Malawians' impulse was not bad. We ought to grow inebriated at the Mysteries, we ought to be lifted out of our normal selves, through sense and through incense – *Good, thick, stupefying incense* wrote Browning, that excellent Protestant poet, sneeringly. Browning was a Victorian, and had forgotten that intense sensation does not stupefy, it hones. Everyday sense is what stupefies, with its endless dull well-lit overplus. It is when sense is churned up, by art or emotion or wine or ritual, that it pierces through nature and fathoms truth. *Blood of Christ, inebriate me*. Ecstasy is the sanest state. We think and feel more and better when the senses are swimming, we are more truly ourselves when lifted out of ourselves. We taste then more vehemently the first and last truth of our dealings with God, which is: *desire*.

Faith and resin

HMMM, A STOLID QUESTIONER MIGHT REMARK: *if incense is weighted with all these diverse connotations (honour, feasting, sweetness, the savour of desire, the transcendent experience of Paradise, ascending prayer), what, ultimately, does it symbolise?*

It does not symbolise anything at all. It *is*.

Catholic truth is so tightly knit that if this stolid questioner could understand what incense does – if he could grasp its nature – he would have understood the Catholic Faith.

The Psalmist does not say *Let my burning of incense be acceptable to Thee as a prayer*. The Psalmist says (cxli²) *dirigatur oratio mea sicut incensum in conspectu tuo, elevatio manuum mearum sacrificium vespertinum: Let my prayer be set before Thee as incense: and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice*: exactly the other way round. The actual, physical act of devotion, offering God perfume of smoke, *is* the act of worship. We worship physically the God who reveals Himself physically, by incarnation and sacrament. Our profoundest adoration is with *things*. That meticulously crafted thurible is a prayer, that punctilious swing of thurible is prayer. We hope our inner prayer might be as devout as that. We hope that our private prayer might be as acceptable as our corporate prayer. We aspire to have our minds and bowels move with the same reality as rite.

Incense does not symbolise internal prayer. It is not an outer model or emblem of inner reality. Internal prayer strives to be emphatic as incense. It models itself on smoke.

By the way:

IN THE SPICY LANDS where Christ lived and died, the local ('Greek' or 'Orthodox' or 'Eastern') Christians still incinerate incense at pretty much every service. In our ('Latin' or 'Catholic' or 'Western') tradition, we're more dour and sparing, using it only at grander rites – Solemn Mass, Solemn Evensong, Solemn Requiem (when our bodies, after a lifetime of being hallowed with the sacraments, are honoured with incense as Temples, emptied for a while, of God the Holy Ghost). 'Solemn', in an ecclesiastic setting, indeed means precisely *smoky*: it signifies *a service at which incense is burned*. Otherwise the Western Church prays, even offering the ultimate Sacrifice, in empty air. Orthodox friends have sighed to me over this odd paucity of ours.

But after all, it's only a rule of public prayer to limit smoke to big, musical affairs. There's nothing to stop us burning incense when we pray privately (in small, stationery burners – thuribles in the home would be a lapse of taste). Indeed, it's an excellent and praiseworthy practice, elevating our private prayer into formality, lifting the experience of

prayer out of life's rut into an intense difference. Christ was first offered incense in a hut in Bethlehem; why not by us at home?

The easiest way is to go to any Indian shop, buy their luridly-coloured packets of incense on wires (they look like sparklers), drive home, get out your prayer-book, light a dozen sticks, shake them until the flame goes out and there's only an embered tip, plant them in a holder: a pot-plant will do. While you say prayers the stick will shed ash and exude fragrance, and your soul will aggrandise mightily

Action at last: incensation of the altar and celebrant

WHILE WE HAVE MEDITATED ON SMOKE we've left the celebrant and his friends standing stock still round the thurible for an immense time. Let's unpetrify this image.

The chase runs on, full-tilt. Three scoops onto red-hot coals – thurifer drops chain – domed lit rattles shut – he hands censer to deacon – usual bows – deacon bowingly hands it to celebrant – celebrant takes and sets about censuring the altar –. What is an 'altar'? – next chapter; next chapter.

Even in notes as exhaustive and exhausting as these, I am not going to tell you exactly the technique for censuring an altar. It requires precisely twenty-eight strokes, evolved over the centuries to apply the gesture of billowing aroma to the crucifix above the altar, and to each corner and surface. The altar's caressed on every side with smoke, while the priest (naturally enough) mutters: *dirigatur oratio mea sicut incensum in conspectu tuo, Let my prayer be set before Thee as incense: and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice* (While he's at it, let's reflect how sumptuous smoke is, even considered as mere substance! It moves like a gas, yet it's a solid: tiny solid particles curling about in warm air, licking upward like drowsy flames. It is the most subtle of solids, and the best able to show how we solid beings aspire to more than this dense world –.)

Then the priest, having censured, is censured. Here, once more, is Catholicism in a single gesture. We observed in the Preparation that the celebrant humbled himself before God, begging forgiveness for the things

he had done which made him unfit to offer the Sacrifice; and then bowed *sideways*, to his friends the ministers and servers, beseeching them to share in this work of forgiving him by praying for him to God. For God is beyond jealousy; He shares His potency with us; He pours His goodness on humanity through the agency of our humans; He is the God of mediated grace and of the sideways bow. Therefore, now that the priest has venerated the altar on which the Sacrifice will come and go, it occurs to us that he ought to be venerated too, since he will invoke the Presence and offer It, and is awesome in his office. (What he's like as a man is neither here nor there.) So when the priest has finished those twenty-eight swings, the deacon takes the thurible from him, bows, and censes the priest himself. Note the graceful gradation of reverence. Incense is measured out in swings (as you'll remember from Byzantine court ceremonial). The priest carefully hallowed the crucifix with three doubles (that is, he made the censer go *puff, puff, pause* thrice). The deacon now censes the celebrant with two doubles – *puff, puff, pause; puff, puff, pause* – and then hands it to the thurifer, who takes it off to its lair in the sacristy, so that, alas, we can no longer discuss it.

It'll be back. Meanwhile honour paid to altar and priest hangs in the air as mystery and glory, surrounding altar and us, and honouring us, too.

Summary; then reluctant farewell to this fine topic; a light *diminuendo*.

INCENSE IN CHRIST'S DAY was used domestically, to mark a feast; and this is a domestic feast, the dinner-party of the household of God: we dress up, we burn candles, naturally we burn perfumes for it.

Incense was used to honour the gods, and naturally we use it liberally to honour the One God. Incense was used, in thuribles, to honour great lords, so naturally we use to honour the holy specifics: crosses, Gospel books, altars, bread and wine even before they are consecrated; priests, sacred ministers, servers, and finally the whole people of God, congregated. (We'll come to these usages in due course – twenty minutes in real time, two months in freeze-frame time.)

These three great uses of incense – domestic, cultic, honorific – flow together in the Mass, just as the lavish smoke from all these various censings flows together, hovering in the air. The atmosphere becomes, in the most literal fashion, highly-flavoured – at this celebration as at the **Last Supper**, the first Mass, in the Upper Room.

It would have been a smoke-filled room after the Passover feast was finished, while Christ and His friends talked and sang, and the scent of roast lamb and bitter herbs mingled with the perfume of the wine and the aroma of frankincense – smells each of them both delectable, and portentous. If you have no stomach for such a rich atmosphere, your sensibility is not Catholic enough. If America, **happy continent of tobacco**, now unhappy home of anti-smoke Nazism, had been discovered in Christ's day, I have no doubt He and His disciples who have smoked cigars after the great feast, for Christ obeyed no foolish taboos, and knew what His Father created the tobacco plant for.

Ah! I read with melancholy pleasure (in *The Faber Book of Smoking*) that back in the charming eighteenth century, an urbane Pope – they had **urbane popes** in those days – issued a shy edict that in future Princes of the Church were forbidden to consume cigars as they celebrated the Mysteries in St Peter's. Servers and subdeacons and deacons, yes, very well, they might continue, since it was such an established custom of the basilica; but a celebrant, no, he has constantly to use both hands to move about and elevate the sacred vessels, he must therefore always be putting down his cigar on the fair linen cloth. The nuns who cared for St Peter's linens were browbeating the Pope about burn-marks; could cardinals please stop smoking at High Mass?