

Incense: It's spiritual significance in the Armenian Church

Adapted from Rev. Fr. Nerses Manoogian

Sunday after Sunday we see the clouds of incense and smell its beautiful fragrance. But what is the significance of using incense in the church? Does it have a Biblical base and spiritual benefit like everything else in our church?

Incense, or *khounj* in Armenian, is an aromatic compound of gums and spices. The base ingredient is the sap of certain trees. It is blended by a skilled perfumer with sweet spices and the fragrant oil of certain flowers, dried and processed for use.

Long ago, incense was considered an expensive commodity. You may recall that it was one of the costly gifts brought by the Wise Men to the baby Jesus. "They offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Matt. 2:11). It was considered so sacred that the offering of incense was the exclusive privilege of the High priest. But later, as Luke indicates, this duty was transferred to ordinary priests as well. (Luke 1:9)

The incense used in worship was clearly distinguished from other incenses and was considered holy. Any incense used in an Armenian Church is blessed before use. There is a special "Incense Blessing" prayer in the book of rituals of our church. Incense has two main benefits: effecting atonement (forgiveness of sin) and symbolizing prayer.

The vessel, censer or *Poorvahr* as it is called in Armenian, itself has a symbolism. It has two basic parts; the lower, where the incense is burned and the upper. The lower part symbolizes the world. The upper part, which is dome-shaped, symbolizes heaven. Four chains, symbolizing the Holy Trinity and one Godhead unite the two parts. There are 12 bells hanging on these chains (3 on each), representing the 12 disciples.

So, when incense is burned in the censer, it is we, the inhabitants of this lower world, who are praying and our prayers are ascending to heaven with the intercession of the disciples. *Poorvahr* thus is the unity of heaven and earth with the union made by earth's prayers and heaven's receiving them.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF INCENSE IN THE CHURCH:

1. In the Book of Numbers when the people of Israel are hit with a severe plague, the Lord tells Aaron through Moses, "Take your censer, and pour fire therein from off the altar, and lay incense on it. And carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement of them" (Num. 16:46). The concept is the same today in our church. At the beginning of the liturgy when the priest puts the offertories on the chalice and covers it, he censers it and asks in return favors from God for his church. "We offer incense before Thee, O Christ," he prays, "for a spiritual fragrance. Receive it for a sweet smelling savor into the holy, heavenly and intelligible place of offering. Send down upon us in return the graces and the gifts of the Holy Spirit" (Missal).

The favor is taken from the altar and offered to the parish when the priest censers the people who cross themselves as a sign of acknowledgment and gratitude.

2. Offering of incense is paralleled to the offering of prayer. In the Book of Psalms we read, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before Thee, and let the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice" (Psalm 141:2). More specific description of this idea is developed in the Book of Revelation and later entered into our liturgy as well. "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer. And he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of the saints upon the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angels before God" (Rev. 8:3-4). "We are grouped in a choir with sweet smelling incense in the upper court of this tabernacle. Receive our prayers ascending straight unto Thee as the savor of frankincense, myrrh and cinnamon" (Missal).

