

# SAINT JOHN



## THE EVANGELIST

### CATHOLIC COMMUNITY



## *Thurifer Procedures*

August 2022

# INTRODUCTION

*“Thurification or incensation is an expression of reverence and of prayer, as is signified in Sacred Scripture” (GIRM, 276).*

Incense is one of the oldest and richest signs of prayer and worship in our liturgy. We read about frankincense as one of the gifts of the Magi at the nativity of Our Lord. We read of the prayers of the faithful rising as incense in the throne-room of heaven in Revelations. It is a fragrant perfume offered to God.

Incense is made from gum olibanum, a precious resin from the *boswellia carterii* bush in Southern Arabia. To this basic ingredient other spices are added to vary the perfume. The grains of incense, carried in the boat, are scooped into the thurible by the priest where they are burned on charcoal disks to create the incense smoke.

Per the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM, 276), incense may be used *optionally* at any Mass:

- a) during the Entrance Procession;
- b) at the beginning of Mass, to incense the cross and the altar;
- c) at the procession before the Gospel and the proclamation of the Gospel itself;
- d) after the bread and the chalice have been placed on the altar, to incense the offerings, the cross, and the altar, as well as the priest and the people;
- e) at the elevation of the host and the chalice after the Consecration.

There is a long liturgical tradition of service at the altar for lay ministers (non-clergy), including lectors, sacristans, and altar servers. Thurifer is one of the more solemn and important roles for altar servers. As the thurifer, they tend the censer (thurible), prepare it for the priest or deacon, and when there is no deacon, themselves may be required to incense the assembly and other ministers, including the priest.

## PROCEDURAL NOTES

**Types of thuribles:** We have two styles and three thurible models at St. John the Evangelist. We have three single-chain, with two larger and one smaller, as well as one smaller multi-chain thurible.



Multi-chain thurible.



Large single-chain  
thurible.



Small single-chain  
thurible.

**SAFETY:** Safety is very important in dealing with hot, live coals. Never leave lighted coals unattended.

- When lighting the thurible, it is recommended **not** to wear your alb, or loose sleeves.
- For those with hair longer than shoulder length, tie your hair back when functioning as thurifer.
- The thurible is hot! Use tongs to handle the coals and never touch the thurible or cover with your hands.
- Do not get in a hurry when handling or opening the thurible cover. The celebrant will wait for you to open the cover.

**Keeping clean:** Working with the thurible can be a messy job. Expect to get charcoal dust on your hands. Keep wet paper towels available to clean hands.

After lighting the thurible in the Sacristy, *it is important to wash all countertops*, even if no charcoal dust is visible. This prevents any charcoal dust to be transferred to the liturgical linens, such as corporals, purificators, and hand towels.

**To clean the pot:** After the coals have burned out and the pot is cool, you can spread the *cold ashes* into the grass outside. When incense is used at multiple masses, the used *hot coals* can be dumped in a bucket with a little water. The bucket is the larger bucket in the Sacristy cabinet. Brush any ash or incense residue still adhering to the firepot into the bucket. If the aluminum foil is torn or badly scorched, replace it with a fresh piece.

The ash in the bucket can be spread in the grass or flowers around the Church.

**Lighting the coals:** The sacristan or thurifer will light the coals, generally in the Sacristy. The number of coals to be lit will depend on the type of Mass and the size of the thurible.

For the two larger thuribles, light no more than three coals initially. More can be added later if needed. For the two smaller thuribles, light no more than two coals initially.

All tools and material are in the drawer marked *Thurible*, in the Sacristy. To light the coals, the safest and easiest method is using the used altar candles located in the *Thurible* drawer. Set the used altar candle onto the metal stand and light. It is recommended to place the candle near the sink. Using the tongs, hold one coal at a time, indented side down (or the logo side if not indented), in the flame. Be prepared: the coal will spark similar to a sparkler. Some sparks may land on your hands; do not jump or drop the coals. It is not necessary to hold the coal in the flame until it turns gray. Once the coal stops sparking, it may be placed in the thurible.

Once all the coals are lighted and placed in the thurible, carefully close the thurible cover.

### **Processing with the thurible**

The single-chain thurible is held by the chain that runs through the thurible lid and connects to the firepot. Although either hand can be used to carry the thurible, using your dominant hand is most common. Hold the chain at a



height where the thurible is about knee height. Some thurifers may not be tall

enough to hold the thurible at knee height without excess chain, which can be stretched to your other hand. You can hold the boat in the opposite hand or one of the other altar servers can carry the boat.

Although not normally used in processions, the multi-chain thurible is carried by the loop at the top of the disk holding the three support chains (make sure the chains are separated and straight). This thurible must be held higher by hand and may be a little more difficult for shorterthurifers. The fourth chain that hangs loose is for raising the thurible lid to add incense.



For both types of thuribles, swing gently along your side. The gentle swinging keeps the coals alight. Do not over swing or the coals may spill out.

Do not genuflect while carrying a thurible. Use a simple or profound bow, whichever is appropriate.

### **Presenting the thurible for incense**

When presenting the thurible for the priest to add incense, there is a slightly different technique between the single and multi-chain thuribles. Although we will cover both in detail, remember to always approach the priest with the thurible in your most comfortable hand, carrying the boat in your other hand. Give the boat to the deacon (or priest) before trying to lift the thurible lid. It is important, whether using the single or multi-chain thurible, to safely present the thurible at a *convenient height* for the priest.

With the dominant hand, carefully lift the thurible cover using the non-metal handle or lift ring. Be careful to *not touch the hot metal* of the thurible!

After the celebrant adds the incense and blesses it, lower the thurible cover and shift the thurible to your dominant hand.



Unless instructed by clergy, **never add incense** to the thurible yourself.

## Incensing

The GIRM provides the guidelines for using incense, including the swings of the thurible (*bold added to emphasize quote, brackets adds for additional information*).

277. The priest, having put incense into the thurible, blesses it with the Sign of the Cross, without saying anything.

**Before and after** an incensation, a **profound bow** is made to the **person or object** that is incensed, except for the incensation of the altar and the offerings for the Sacrifice of the Mass.

The following are incensed with **three swings** [*double swings*] of the thurible: the Most Blessed Sacrament, a relic of the Holy Cross and images of the Lord exposed for public veneration, the offerings for the sacrifice of the Mass, the altar cross, the Book of the Gospels, the paschal candle, **the Priest, and the people**.

**Two swings** [*double swings*] of the thurible are used to incense relics and images of the Saints exposed for public veneration; this should be done, however, only at the beginning of the celebration, following the incensation of the altar.

The altar is incensed with **single swings** of the thurible in this way [...]

Incensing is normally done by the priest or deacon. However, on occasions when there is not a deacon, the thurifer will incense the *celebrant, any concelebrants, and the assembly*. The thurifer may be a qualified *altar server or sacristan*.

## Swings of the thurible

There are two kinds of swing used for incensing; a double swing and a single swing. For a double swing, the thurible is swung twice at the person or object to be incensed and then lowered. For a single swing, it is swung once and then lowered. However, when incensing the altar, the single swings are made continuously as the celebrant walks around the altar.

To use a thurible with grace and skill takes practice. An essential first step is to work out how to hold the chains in a comfortable and convenient manner when swinging the thurible. Each person should develop this by practice, although this method is a good starting point.

- (a) Hold the ring and upper part of the chain in the left hand, letting it rest against the chest. With the right hand, let the chain lay between the index and middle finger, holding it securely by the thumb. Do this close enough to the bowl so that the swinging of the thurible may be directed and controlled easily.
- (b) Using the right hand, bring the bowl in front of the chest. Depending on how close it is to the bowl, the right hand should be about eye level (lower when incensing an altar). Using the chain to control the movement, swing the bowl back and forth towards the person or object in a steady and smooth motion. Do not rush the swing.
- (c) Having completed the required number of swings, lower the bowl once more. Then bring it to your side or return it to the thurifer, deacon, or the thurible stand.

## MASS PROCEDURE

**Before Mass:** The sacristan or thurifer (or both) lights the coals and adds them to the thurible approximately 10-15 minutes before Mass. If the thurible is to be carried in the Procession, bring the thurible and incense boat to the Narthex, otherwise it is to be hung on the stand at the back of the Sanctuary.

The sacristan or thurifer will place an extra charcoal on or near the thurible stand, sitting in small black plate. This coal is to be added to the thurible *after the Gospel Proclamation*.

The priest or deacon will add the incense to the thurible for the procession. If there is a delay in the procession after the incense is added, the thurifer may need to take the thurible outside to avoid breathing problems for some parishioners.

**Procession:** The thurifer leads the procession, swinging the thurible along their side. With a simple bow, the thurifer enters the sanctuary and will either wait on the celebrant or hang the thurible on the stand.

**Mass:** The presider will determine when incense will be used during mass and will brief the thurifer. Although dependent on the celebrant, the three main times are just before the Collect, during the Gospel Proclamation, and right after the Preparation of the Gifts. This following is the normal flow.

After entering the Sanctuary, the thurifer stands with the thurible and boat *behind the altar*, while the celebrant and other clergy venerate the altar. When the celebrant approaches, the thurifer will hand the boat to him and raise the thurible lid. After the incense is added, lower the lid, accept the boat while transferring the thurible to the celebrant. While the celebrant incenses the altar, the thurifer may place the boat on the thurible stand and then await the celebrant behind the altar. When the celebrant is done, he will give the thurible back to the thurifer to place it on the stand and return to their seat. When the altar server is the thurifer, they normally are seated in the center area of the sanctuary, next to the crucifer, or near the credence table, in front of the thurible stand. When the sacristan is thurifer, they will normally return to their designated seat in the pews, unless otherwise directed by clergy.

For the Gospel Proclamation, after the second reading, when the Alleluia is said or sung, the thurifer will take the thurible and boat to the celebrant. After the celebrant adds the incense, lower the lid and take the boat. No need to bow. When an altar server is the thurifer, they will lead the Gospel candle procession to the ambo and stand behind the deacon or priest. When the sacristan is the thurifer, they proceed straight to the ambo and stand behind the priest or deacon. After the deacon or priest announces the Gospel reading, he will take the thurible and incense the Book of Gospels. If possible, at this time, set the boat aside. The deacon or priest will hand the thurible back to the thurifer. When the altar server is the thurifer, the preferred procedure is to descend from the Sanctuary steps and stand in front of the ambo gently swinging the thurible for the duration of the Gospel reading. At the end of the Gospel reading, recover the boat and return it with the thurible back to the stand.

When the sacristan is the thurifer, they may stand behind the priest/deacon gently swinging the thurible, or may immediately proceed to return the thurible and boat to the stand.

Once the thurible is back on the stand, check and add another coal if required.



Toward the end of the Preparation of the Gifts (*just before the washing of the hands*), when the celebrant first raises the host, the thurifer will approach and stand near the altar with the thurible and boat. When the celebrant is ready, hand the boat to him and lift the thurible lid. After the celebrant puts in the incense, lower the lid and exchange the boat for the thurible. The celebrant will begin incensing the altar. At this time, return the boat to the stand and then stand near the altar. If there is a deacon, he will take the thurible, incense the celebrant, any concelebrants, and congregation, then return the thurible to you to put on the stand. However, if there is no deacon, the thurifer incenses the celebrant, any concelebrants, and the congregation.

**Incensing the clergy and congregation:** When the celebrant hands you the thurible, you bow toward him, incense him with *3 sets of 2 swings*, and after the last swing, bow again toward him. Repeat this same process for any concelebrants if they were *not standing with the celebrant*. After the bow, proceed around one side of the altar to stand facing half of the congregation. Motion for the people on that side of the church to stand (if they are not standing), bow, then incense them with *3 sets of 2 swings* (in their direction), and then bow again after the last swing. Proceed to the other side of the altar and repeat the process for that side of the church.

When instructed by the celebrant, an alternative method for incensing the congregation is to proceed around the altar and stand in the center, near the steps. Motion for everyone to rise, bow, then incense them with the *3 sets of 2 swings* (one set for the left, one for the center, and one for the right).

When done, return the thurible to its stand.

**Recessional and after Mass:** Although not common, if the celebrant has informed the thurifer, lead the Recessional with the thurible swinging. If the thurible is not part of the Recessional, then process with the altar servers, leaving the thurible on its stand.

If the sacristan has asked, after hanging up the alb, the thurifer can assist the sacristan in extinguishing the coals and spreading the ashes into the earth.