# “Smells and bells”

Every Catholic is familiar with the sights, the sounds and even the smells that adorn the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Glowing candles, ringing bells and the aroma of incense are etched forever in our senses. These ancient sacramentals both inspire and excite us during our worship and adoration of Almighty God. Their use dates back thousands of years.

## Incense

In Judea, at the time of Christ’s birth, incense was rare and expensive. Thus it was a perfect gift for the new King of the Jews: “They [Magi] prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense [incense] and myrrh” (Mt 2:11).

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incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the golden altar

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Two thousand years before Christ, ancient civilizations used incense in religious ceremonies to drive away demons, in funeral services and when saluting their gods. It was common practice among the pagans to carry burning incense in advance

of a procession that included the Egyptian pharaoh or Roman emperor. Romans offered Christians the opportunity to save themselves from persecution if the Christian would burn incense before the statue of a Roman god or goddess. In the Old Testament Book of Exodus, Chapter 30, God directs the use of incense on an altar and in the tent of meeting. Jewish priests like Zechariah (cf. Lk 1:8-10) offered incense inside the Temple.

The Eastern Church likely used incense as early as the fifth century, but it wasn't until the seventh century that the Latin Church embraced incense, and then primarily for processions. In the 11th century it was added into the Roman rite, initially incorporated just before the Gospel to honor Christ's words and later into other parts of the Mass. Incense was soon used during funerals, as part of Eucharistic Adoration and to piously purify persons, sacred images, churches and church fixtures.

Regarding incense, the New Catholic Dictionary explains how "burning signifies zeal, its fragrance virtue, and its rising smoke prayers going up before the throne of God."

The current General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), No. 276, reads, "Thurification or incensation is an expression of reverence and of prayer, as is signified in the Sacred Scriptures." The GIRM defines those points in the Mass that incense may be used: entrance procession, when arriving at the sanctuary to incense the cross and altar, the priest and people, before the Gospel is read, at the offertory and at the raising of the host and chalice following the consecration.

## Candles

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The first widespread use of candles by the Roman Church was around the seventh century and may have illuminated an image of Jesus or the saints. Also, candles were carried in processions that involved the pope and were brought forth in the Mass when it was time to acclaim the Gospel.  By the 11th century, candles were placed on or near the altar. Today candles – preferably made of beeswax as it burns better than paraffin – are often carried during the Mass entrance procession and adorn places in the church:

- **Altar candles** – GIRM, No. 117, identifies the number to be used during Mass: “At least two in any celebration, or even four or six, especially for a Sunday Mass or a holy day of obligation. If the diocesan Bishop celebrates, then seven candles should be used.”
- **Votive candles** – These are grouped in rows or banks throughout the church. The word “votive” comes from a

Latin word votum, meaning a personal or private vow. We light these candles before the image of Jesus, the Blessed Mother or a saint to give honor and express our prayers, which continue to be offered up through the candle's light.

- **Easter candle** – The Easter or Paschal candle, symbolizing the risen Jesus, is the large candle located near the baptismal font. A new Easter candle is lit at the Easter Vigil and solemnly carried into the church as part of the procession. It is placed next to the ambo, where it remains throughout the Easter season, and then moved to the proximity of the baptismal font. It burns during every baptism and funeral.
- **Sanctuary candle** – In accordance with Canon Law (Canon 940) the real presence of Jesus is identified by this candle, much like a beacon, glowing perpetually near the tabernacle.
- **Candlemas** (Presentation of the Lord) – Every Feb. 2, a priest blesses all the candles to be used in the parish, and then parishioners typically carry lighted candles while processing into Mass. The pure and spotless candlelight represents the light of Christ and recalls the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple and Simeon's referring to Jesus as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel" (Lk 2: 32).

**You 'Shattered My Deafness'**

St. Augustine’s Confessions (10:27), perhaps unintentionally, reflect the emotions we experience through the sounds, sights and fragrance of the Mass: “You have called to me, and have cried out, and have shattered my deafness. You have blazed forth with light, and have shone upon me, and you have put my blindness to flight! You have sent forth fragrance, and I have drawn in my breath, and I pant after you. I have tasted you, and I hunger and thirst after you. You have touched me, and I have burned for your peace.”

## Bells

Bells are of ancient use, and legend holds that St. Paulinus of Nola, Italy, was the first to use bells in a Christian religious setting, summoning monks to prayer in the early fifth century. Soon nearby churches began ringing bells to call the faithful to worship.

Bells have been rung not only to summon people to Mass, but also to announce the time, warn of impending disasters such as bad weather or invading armies, to proclaim holidays, as a curfew signal, call people to pray the Angelus and to denote funerals. The sound of bells attracts our attention and calls us together.

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Certain theologians claim that bells are unnecessary and Mass attendees need not be alerted that something special is about to happen. Consequently, some Catholics falsely believe that

bells can no longer be rung during Mass. The GIRM says: “A little before the consecration, when appropriate, a server rings a bell as a signal to the faithful. According to local custom, the server also rings the bell as the priest shows the host and then the chalice” (No. 150).

*D.D. Emmons writes from Pennsylvania. This article originally appeared in the March 17, 2019, issue of OSV Newsweekly.*