

THE POT OF INCENSE, INCENSE ITSELF AND ITS USE IN MASONIC LODGES IN THE UNITED STATES

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From our earliest time in lodge, we are asked, “What came ye here to do?” It’s obvious, we came to learn! Additionally, we came to learn, to subdue our passions and to improve ourselves. Regardless, we came to learn! While learning the catechisms and rituals are important, indeed very important, it is also important to learn more. In the First Section of the Entered Apprentice degree, the Master informs the candidate that Freemasonry makes its votaries wiser. A Votary is defined as “a devoted follower, adherent, or advocate of someone or something.” In the Second Section of the Entered Apprentice degree, the Master also says in part: “the cultivation of the human mind” and later says “its lessons are illustrated by symbols.” In the Fellow Craft degree, The Master informs the new Fellow Craft mason “you are expected to make the liberal arts and sciences your future study”. We learn about the five senses in the Stair Lecture including the sense of smell.

Ongoing learning is mentioned in all three degrees as well as in the lesson of the Beehive where we are taught to industriously occupy our minds in the attainment of useful knowledge. Throughout Masonry, we learn that it is a progressive science, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. In the opening Charge we learn that “wisdom dwells with contemplation, there we must seek her”. In order to help make our rough ashlar a smooth ashlar, let us contemplate the symbols and apply them in our daily lives as well as in our lodges. We read that the “Pot of Incense is an emblem of a pure heart, which is always an acceptable sacrifice to the deity. And, as this glows with fervent heat, so should our hearts continually glow with gratitude to the Great beneficent Author of our existence for the manifold blessings and comforts we enjoy.” But is that all we know?

A pure heart can be described as a faithful heart, **or** a person whose heart God has made pure, or someone who has nothing to do with falsehoods. In Matthew 5:8 we read “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God”. Incense has been used from the earliest of times, first mentioned in the Holy Bible in Exodus 30:7, “And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet *incense* every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn *incense* upon it”. At the Temple, King Solomon had an altar for *incense*, we find in 1 Chronicles, 28-29: “And for the altar of *incense*, refined gold by weight, and gold for pattern of the chariot of the cherubim, that spread out their wings, and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord”. (emphasis added by author) Incense was used at King Solomon’s Temple. In 2 Chronicles, 2:4 we read “Behold, I build an house to the name of the LORD my God, to dedicate it to him, and to burn before him sweet *incense*, and for the continual shewbread, and for the burnt offerings morning and evening, on the sabbaths, and on the new moons, and on the solemn feasts of the LORD our God. This is an ordinance for ever to Israel.” In 1 Kings 3:3 we read “And Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father: only he sacrificed and burnt *incense* in high places”. And later in Chapter 9, verse 25 we read “And three times in a year did Solomon offer burnt offerings and peace offerings upon the altar which he built unto the LORD, and he burnt *incense* upon the altar that was before the LORD. So, he finished the house.”

Incense continues to be used by many faiths. It has been employed in worship by Christians since antiquity, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church/Eastern Orthodox Church, Orthodox Christian churches, Lutheran Churches, Old Catholic/Liberal Catholic Churches, Episcopal Churches and some Anglican Churches. Buddhists regard incense as “divine odor” and its smell is meant to evoke the presence of Buddhist divinities. Burning incense sticks works as a sensory way to sanctify the space and offering behaviors with mindfulness and awareness. Recipes for incense vary, but are described in Exodus 30:34 as “And the LORD said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte,

and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight.” Common scents for incense can be procured commercially, and among them are Frankincense and Myrrh. There are 121 references to incense in the Bible. In Hinduism, incense sticks are burned in their temples to purify their environment. In Judaism, incense is still used today, in varying ways. The Torah, as I mentioned above, describes the use of incense. Modern Synagogues, such as Reform, Conservative and Orthodox do not typically use incense, however it may be burned Saturday evening to celebrate Havdala, the end of Shabbat or the Sabbath. To celebrate Havdala, a recipe of cloves, cinnamon and cardamom is used. In Islam, incense is used in several events such as graduation ceremonies, and most notably the regular rite of purifying and cleansing the temple in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is to perfume the air and uplift the souls of pilgrims. Olive tree leaves are also burnt as incense in some Muslim Mediterranean countries. In general, the smoke of burning incense is interpreted by several religions as a symbol of prayers of the faithful rising to heaven. A pure heart can mean many things, but generally can be pure intention, having nothing to do with falsehood.

From my own experience traveling to Masonic lodges in Kentucky, Indiana and Florida, I have noticed that very few lodges use incense. Uses in Kentucky seem to be limited to Louisville Lodge #400, where a Deacon walked about the Lodge room floor with a lit stick of incense. He told me its purpose was to cleanse the Lodge. Abraham Lodge #8 does something similar.

I have learned that there is a resurgence in the “observant” or “restoration” movement within the craft nationwide. I conducted a survey of the Grand Secretaries of the mainstream Grand Lodges in the 50 United States. Twenty-five Grand Lodges responded representing 4,426 lodges and only 25 of those Lodges are confirmed to currently use incense in some manner. Surprisingly, this represents 0.565% of lodges currently using incense in some form. Two lodges have a designated member known as a Thurifer to use the incense. Two lodges use incense sticks in the Chamber of Reflection, one lodge has the Master light the incense and the remaining lodges use incense sticks or thuribles in the lodge room.

One Grand Secretary reported that the lodge members voted to use incense in their lodge. Other Grand Secretaries reported a favorable attitude toward the use of incense in lodge. The responses also included remarks about which officer actually used the incense in their lodges. In some lodges, the Master lights and maintains the incense. In other lodges, a designated Thurifer handles and maintains the incense, but mostly, the Grand Secretaries did not know who uses the incense. But why do the overwhelming majority of lodges choose not to incorporate this into their lodge experience? The use of incense seems to be appropriate, since our lodges are a representation of King Solomon’s Temple, and incense was used there. We pray in lodge at least twice per meeting, and often more than twice. Incense can be burned in a pot, thurible, or censer. Incense, in the form of pebbly grains or powder is spooned onto hot coals in a pot, thurible or censer. Incense can also be burned on sticks prepared for that purpose. Incense sticks are easily available at smoke shops while other incense is available from religious supply companies and online retailers. It is important to note certain safety precautions. The pot or thurible will be hot so the use of tongs to light and extinguish the coal is necessary. Also, a metal can and some water to extinguish the coal is necessary. The stick will drop ash as it burns, so care must be given if using a stick.

At its core, Freemasonry is an initiatic rite. The appeal of a masonic experience which connects with the membership on several levels and senses is something that continues to grow in American Freemasonry. We see more lodges today that are reincorporating music, lighting and highly proficient ritual. The continued re-emergence of the Chamber of Reflection as well as formal Festive Boards and Table Lodges are another indication of the appetite of a deeper experience. The use of incense within the lodge then not only is another expression of this movement but is also clearly supported by our own symbolism and history. A lodge that chooses to adopt incense into their experience then could consider several possible uses which might include the following:

- Lodges that employ a Chamber of Reflection may consider using incense there.
- A simple method could be incorporated by placing a thurible on the altar or a small stand or table near the Lesser Lights.

- A Deacon, Chaplain or other member could carry incense about the lodge room floor, either incense in a thurible, or a stick, and recite Psalms 133:1-3 and the paragraph concerning the Pot of Incense from the Master Mason degree or the Opening Charge.

Sometimes, we wonder what we can do to make our meetings more informative and educational rather than reading the minutes and paying the bills. Spreading the word about the use of incense in lodges nationwide can be accomplished by presentations during a Lodgeeducational portion of their stated meeting, District Meetings, presentations at Lodges of Research, masonic societies, associations, internet-basedmeetings, and conferences. Grand Masters could encourage lodges to implement the use of incense in lodges by way of Grand Master's Lodge of Excellence Award and during the Educational Conference.

The use of incense, along with our ceremonies and ritual work, can be a way to set a tone of peace and harmony, and provide a happy recollection of our lodge experience. I hope you have found this information helpful and will consider implementing the information presented here in your local lodges.

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