

THURIFER AT HIGH MASS

GENERAL AND HISTORICAL NOTES

The thurifer (Th) has the privilege of bearing the thurible and incensing the various ministers and laity during the Offertory.

The word *thurible* is derived from *thus*, which is Latin for incense. It is generally thought, that the golden thuribles used by the Jews was very similar as employed at Mass now, that is, with three chains, though it is unknown if the Jewish thuribles possessed a cover.

The history of the use of incense is very ancient, dating back to earliest ages. Incense was widely used by both the Jews in the Temple ceremonies, as commanded by Almighty God Himself, as well as by the pagan religions. In ancient times, burning incense was also used as an air freshener in countries under Roman or Asian influence; it was also used in ancient Eastern cultures to incense the guests as a mark of respect at banquets. Incense was so widely used, that God Himself commanded the Jews, that the incense compound made for use in the Temple ceremonies, was reserved to God alone, and not to be used for secular functions.

Incense was greatly used by the Jews in the Temple ceremonies, and so it would only be natural for the Church to continue this usage, for the Temple rites were foreshadows of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and incense has great symbolic purpose. Like the burning smoke of the sacrificed animals of the Old Testament rose towards God in a sweet odor, so too, does incense. We read in the Psalms, “*Let my prayer be like incense in Thy sight.*” Incense then, represents prayer, which rises to God in a wonderful odor, which pleases Him. While incense represents prayer, the charcoals used to burn the incense represent the intensity of our devotion, or love for God. Without a fervent, or burning devotion for God, our prayers, despite how many we might say, will not rise up to God, just like placing incense on unlighted charcoals will not provide any smoke. However, a fervent prayer will be pleasing to God and consequently do much good, just as a single, small piece of incense can fill a very large church with its enriching odor.

The use of incense is also connected with the idea of sacrifice, and so the altar is incensed twice during a *missa cantata*. During the Mass incense is used when incensing the altar to show the rising of prayer to God. During the reading of the Gospel, incense is used to represent the sweet odor of Christ, which fills the world through the announcement of His Holy Word. Incense is used at the Offertory, to sanctify the Oblations after they have been prepared and the various ministers and people are incensed to signify charity towards one another and the dwelling of the Holy Trinity in their souls through grace.

HANDLING THE THURIBLE

-while processing with the thurible, Th should:

- swing the thurible gently with the cover slightly open
- not allow the thurible to swing higher than the height of his waist
- take care to walk solemnly and in the center of the aisle
- take precaution when walking around corners
- desist from swinging the thurible when ascending or descending steps

-when not in motion and holding the thurible, Th should:

- keep the cover slightly open (this will allow for an airflow and keep the cover cool) by holding the disk under the index finger and thumb of a clenched hand (but in a way that the chains are not affected; *i.e.*, crimped) and the cover chain ring draped over the disk and held by the thumb (or any other finger)
- when the office of the thurible is being exercised (*i.e.*, when incense has been imposed and blessed), hold the thurible in the right hand; these times occur:
 - a. Processional (but not during Preparatory Prayers)
 - b. Gospel action (until C has been incensed after reading the Gospel)

- c. Offertory incensations (here the thurible can be retained in a readiness position between each incensation; *i.e.*, the left hand with disk over the breast and the thurible held in the right at chest level)
 - d. Recessional
- otherwise, when not exercising the office, hold the thurible in the left hand

Stabilizing a thurible before transferring the thurible or incensing a person

After closing the thurible, and before grasping the chains to give the thurible to a minister or incense someone (or something), one should ensure that the thurible is hanging level. Otherwise, the thurible will swing crookedly when incensing someone.

The following steps are used to stabilize a thurible; with practice they take only a second or two to complete:

1. Equalize the levelness of the thurible by holding the disk ring by your right index finger.
2. Secure the cover by sliding the middle ring down with your left hand till it is as close to the cover as possible.
3. Take hold of the chains under the disk with your left hand. The thurible is now level and may be passed to another minister or readied to incense a person.

The act of incensing with a thurible

The Roman method of incensing with a thurible is a skill that is perfected after some practice. The act of incensing should be performed gracefully, deliberately and with solemnity, but not rapidly or forcibly.

When incensing with the thurible, the hands continued to be held as they were folded (fingers extended and together, not as a fist), though in a slightly modified fashion.

To prepare to incense a person or an object:

1. Hold the chains together under the disk between the thumb and index finger (*i.e.*, pinched between the outstretched fingers) against your sternum.
2. With your right hand (with the palm facing your body), open your index and middle fingers like a pair of scissors then grab hold of the chains between them placing the index finger *in front of the chains* and the rest of the fingers *behind the chains*. Slide your hand down the length of the chains until it is touching the cover ring.
3. When the thurible has been raised to the incensing position (either to the line of sight or the chest as described below), the chains should be gracefully draped downwards, not held stiff or taut.
4. A bow (normally a simple, except to prelates) is made before and after incensing a person.

There are two types of swings used in the Roman Rite; the double and single swings.

A **double swing** is used when incensing a person or object of high rank. It is made by:

1. Raising the thurible (where the cover meets the bowl) to the line of sight (one's eyes).
2. Then with a slight push with the forearm (only to start the movement), by pivoting the wrist, two "throws" (actually, *controlled* swings) are made, thereby slightly elevating the thurible in an inverse arc towards the person. During each swing, the thurible may *lightly* touch the chains upon their downward fall.
3. Upon completion of the *last* double swing (*i.e.*, after the last time the thurible is swung outwards), the thurible should be lowered gracefully in a slight converse arc until it lightly touches the chain at chest level. The thurible should not be abruptly dropped to chest level.

Here is a list of the **types of double swings** used in a typical parish setting:

- One double:** major clerics in choir, master of ceremonies (even a layman), one for each acolyte (as they represent the minor order)
- Two doubles:** sacred ministers (deacon and subdeacon), major superiors, pastor, first class relics of saints (e.g., during sung Masses on the altar)

Three doubles: Blessed Sacrament, altar crucifix (corpus of Our Lord), celebrant, and fanned (i.e., middle, left and then right) for the book of Gospels [i.e., an image of Christ always receives three doubles].

A **single swing** is made by:

1. Raising the thurible in front of the chest.
2. Then with a slight push with the forearm (only to start the movement), by pivoting the wrist, a single *controlled* swing is made as with the double, including allowing the thurible to *lightly* touch the chains after the swing.
3. When making a “fanned” set of swings to a group, the action is repeated *directionally* without a pause in this manner:
 - Two singles fanned (used for a group of only two): right side first, then left
 - Three singles fanned (use for a group of three or more): middle, left and right

Here is a list of the **single swings** used in a typical parish setting:

One single: minor clergy or non-clerical religious in choir, one server

Two singles (fanned): a group of two of those mentioned above

Three singles (fanned): any group of three or more such as the congregation, servers, but even for the clergy in choir if these are numerous and would take a great length of time to incense individually (nonetheless, high ranked cleric, e.g., the pastor, should be incensed individually). This is also used when blessing palms, candles, and a group of other sacramentals

NB: a prescribed series of individual single swings is used to incense the altar, or for any other time when incensing in motion.

TOOLS NEEDED TO PREPARE THE CHARCOALS

In the old days when coal was used for cooking or heating, it was an easy enough task to take a few coals from a nearby stove or brazier. Now however, it is necessary to have several items available so that Th may actually light and heat up the charcoals. Th will need at least:

- A pair of tongs.
- A flat head screwdriver.
- A pan for lighting the charcoals.¹
- An electric circular heating coil.²
- A coffee can (or baker’s pan) containing a layer of sand.³

PREPARATIONS BEFORE MASS

-Th should be in the sacristy twenty minutes before Mass begins.⁴

-Th should immediately vest in his cassock, but not in his surplice. Th should always take off his surplice every time that he works with the charcoals, so as to prevent the surplice from being ruined by sparks or charcoal dust.

-Th then sets up his work area with the items described above and immediately begins lighting the charcoals

-when the charcoals are sufficiently lit, they should be cut with the screwdriver in quarters (for real charcoals; halves for self-lites⁵) and then transferred to the firepot with tongs arranging the charcoal pieces evenly and level in the firepot

¹ A baker’s pan is sufficient for this. A charcoal lighting stand may be built out of channel and plate steel to facilitate this item. This also prevents one from burning a table or counter top *via* the heated baker’s pan. Though a thick towel should be placed underneath the pan to help prevent this.

² The portable kind used for heating a pot. These can be found in many drug stores, appliance and hardware stores for a reasonable price.

³ The sand prevents the bottom of the can from rusting due to the oxidization of the used charcoals.

⁴ Th has more items connected with his office than any other server and therefore, his duties take longer especially before and after Mass.

FOR SUNDAYS WHEN THE ASPERGES PRECEDES

-Th then goes to the sacristy and holds the aspersory and aspergil (which is resting inside the aspersory) in his right hand with his left hand over his breast. He then lines up for the processional at the head of the formation of servers. [Or he may process in flanking C with the MC on the left, holding the aspersory in the left hand and the cope's ophrey in his right]

PROCESSION FOR ASPERGES

- After responding, "*In nomine Christi, Amen.*"⁶ Th rings the bell and then leads the procession. Th should take care to process solemnly and in the center of the aisle.
- upon reaching the foot, Th genuflects and goes to the Gospel side of the foot, leaving adequate room for any other servers that need to come to the foot to genuflect. [If Th processes in flanking C, he simply passes the thurible to the MC after gfing]
- when C and the MC reach the foot, Th genuflects in unison with them, and then passes the aspersory to the MC behind C.
- Th then kneels with C and the MC. After the MC, Th and the servers on the Epistle side have been sprinkled, Th stands with C and the MC.
- Th then genuflects with them, passes to the other side of C in unison with the MC (Th passes on the outside, while the MC passes inside, that is *closest* to C), takes the ophrey of the cope and follows C while he sprinkles the clergy and congregation.
- just before the *Gloria Patri* is sung, Th turns with C and the MC to face the altar and makes a simple bow with them during the first portion
- upon reaching the end of the Nave, Th genuflects in unison with C and the MC, and then switches sides with the MC as before. Th resumes holding the ophrey until they reach the foot. Sometime after switching sides, the MC will return the aspersory to Th, who will hold it in his outside hand, since he is now holding the cope
- upon reaching the foot, Th genuflects with C and the MC. Th bows at "*Oremus*" as usual, and if necessary, assists with holding the Asperges card or other book⁷ with the MC in front of C
- after the oration is completed, Th takes the card, genuflects with C and the MC, meets the MC shoulder to shoulder, leads C to the sedilia, and then returns the aspersory and card to the sacristy⁸
- after putting these items back in the sacristy, Th then prepares the thurible as previously described for the first incensation of the altar

FOR HIGH MASSES WITHOUT AN ASPERGES

-Th then goes to the sacristy, and prepares the charcoals for the thurible as previously described. Th then takes the thurible and boat and lines up for the processional at the head of the formation of servers

PROCESSIONAL

- when C is ready, Th gives the boat to the MC, and opens the thurible as previously described for the imposition of incense. When the imposing of incense is finished, Th receives the boat back from the MC and then takes his place at the head of the formation of servers to lead the procession.
- after responding, "*In nomine, Christe. Amen,*" Th rings the bell and then leads the procession, swinging the thurible as previously described.
- upon reaching the foot, Th genuflects and then proceeds to the Epistle side of the sanctuary to his normal position⁹ where he remains standing holding the thurible¹⁰

⁵ NB: self-lites should be cut inside the thurible's firepot, as these tend to break up into small pieces. Quarter pieces will allow them to evenly cover the firepot's bottom, thereby consuming the incense more efficiently, but these will also burn faster.

⁶ Pronounced as: een noh-meh-nee chree-steh, ah-mehn.

⁷ A *Liber Usualis* or altar prayers manual can also be used for this purpose.

⁸ These items should not be placed on the credence unless they will be needed later on during the ceremonies.

⁹ Most rubricians place Th's normal position as being in front of (between Ac1 and Ac2) or rather near the credence. However, this is often impractical in most sanctuaries because of space limitations. In this set of instructions, Th's normal position will be placed in the sacristy doorway on the Epistle side. This allows Th easy access to the sacristy to perform his various charcoal duties, while staying out of the acolytes way when they perform their duties at the

PREPARATORY PRAYERS TO THE FIRST INCENSATION OF THE ALTAR

-during the Preparatory Prayers, Th remains standing at his normal position. Th makes the responses and various bows with the MC and other servers, however, because he is holding an object, he does not make any gestures with his hands.

-when the Preparatory Prayers are finished, Th meets the MC on his *right*¹¹ side on the Epistle side of the foot and gives him the boat.

-both then immediately ascend to the predella, and Th opens the thurible for C to impose incense. After C has blessed the incense, Th then closes the thurible and gives it to the MC.

-Th then goes to the left of C, without genuflecting, by going behind him. Th genuflects in unison with C and the MC as required, holding his right hand under C's elbow for every genuflection. Th must ensure to move as one unit with C and the MC by:

- turning with C towards the reliquaries (if any) when he incenses them
- remaining shoulder to shoulder with C or the MC as required (e.g., upon reaching the Gospel side of the predella, Th usually needs to remain on the front corner while C incenses the Gospel front of the altar).
- if C is wearing a "gothic" chasuble, Th should hold the edges with the MC while C is incensing. However, the edges are released and then retrieve before and after each genuflection.

-after C returns the thurible to the MC, Th descends *in plano* shoulder to shoulder with the MC and then turns inwards with him thereby ending up on the MC's left.

-Th then makes a profound bow in unison with the MC before and after he incenses C.

-Th then receives the thurible back from the MC and then returns to his normal position

INTROIT TO THE GRADUAL

-during this interval, Th remains standing in his normal position and keeps the cover of the thurible slightly open, but does not swing it.

GOSPEL IMPOSITION AND ACTIONS

-When the MC signals C to rise from the sedilia, Th goes to the Epistle side of the foot and meets the MC there as before.

-Th and the MC ascend to the predella, and incense is imposed as usual. Th however, takes the boat from the MC, and descending *via* the Epistle altar steps, goes to the credence, puts the boat there, and then leads the waiting acolytes to the foot. However, Th does not swing the thurible during any of the Gospel actions.

-upon arrival at the foot, Th takes position on the front, *left* side of the box formation.¹²

-when the MC descends with the missal to the center of the foot, Th signals a genuflection,¹³ and then leads the acolytes to the Gospel side of the foot. Th should again be on the front, left side, immediately against the foot.

credence. If your church does not have a side sacristy door, either on the Epistle or Gospel side of the sanctuary, then Th departs *via* the Communion rail gate, which remains open during Mass, except during the distribution of Communion.

¹⁰ A thurible stand should not be used in the sanctuary during Mass, as it is Th's duty to bear the thurible when it is not being used, except after the *Pater noster*, when Th's office comes to a conclusion (unless the thurible is placed in the care of the sacristan in the sacristy during the interval when it is not needed).

¹¹ Normally Th would be to the *left* of the MC, but out of practical consideration (so as to avoid having Th cross to the other side of the MC when on the predella), Th is placed on the *right side* of the MC. This occurs every time both ascend to the predella to have incense imposed.

¹² All in this formation should be shoulder to shoulder. The formation would look like this:

Th MC
Ac2 Ac1

If due to space limitations a line formation is used instead, Th takes position on the left side of the center. The formation would appear as such:

Ac2 Th MC Ac1

¹³ With a single clap, not by snapping his fingers (this is undignified and unfit for a sanctuary). Th should do this by slapping his left hand (which is free) softly on top of his right hand (which is holding the disk).

-when the MC has descended *in plano*, Th then gives the thurible to him.¹⁴ Th does not bow while C and the MC perform the incensing of the Book of the Gospels.

-when the MC returns *in plano* on the right side of Th, Th then receives the thurible back from the MC¹⁵ and holds it in his right hand with the cover slightly opened, however he should not swing the thurible at all during the reading of the Gospel.¹⁶

-when C has reached the ending of the Gospel, Th then gives the thurible to the MC, makes a profound bow with the MC before and after the incensing of C and then receives the thurible back, but now holding it in his left hand, since his office for the Gospel has come to an end.

-Th then leads the acolytes back to the foot as before, but this time the MC signals the genuflection.

-after the genuflection, Th leads the acolytes back to the credence, and then returns to the sacristy to prepare a new batch of charcoals for the Offertory.¹⁷

IF THERE IS A SERMON

-if there is a sermon immediately after the reading of the Gospel, Th should not begin lighting new charcoals until the sermon is a third of the way finished. Meanwhile, Th should be sitting in his normal position for the first part of the sermon.¹⁸

DURING THE CREDO

-Th should have his new batch of charcoals prepared and be in the doorway with his thurible ready before the *Credo* begins.

-during the *Credo*, Th bows and also genuflects in unison with C and the other servers.

-after the *Credo*, Th remains standing in his normal position.

OFFERTORY INCENSATION OF THE ALTAR AND PERSONS

-after the acolytes have descended from the altar with their cruets, Th gives the boat to the MC and goes to the Epistle side of the foot with him as usual.

-when C begins the *Veni, Sanctificator* prayer (when C makes an arc and then joins his hands), Th and the MC then ascend to the predella, and incense is imposed as usual.

-C will incense the oblations first, without previously having made a genuflection. He will then incense the altar as usual.

-Th will join the MC for the incensation of C as usual, and after the MC has returned the thurible to Th, Th will turn inwards with the MC and then proceed shoulder to shoulder with him to the foot. Th will genuflect in unison with the MC, go to the center of the foot, bow to the MC, incense him with one double and then bow again. When Th incenses the other clergy or servers, whether in the sanctuary or in the chancel, he should do so *in line* with the center of the altar.¹⁹

-Th will then incense the other personages in this order:

- clerics in major orders in the chancel
- servers on the Epistle side of the sanctuary
- servers in the chancel (*i.e.*, torchbearers)
- schola (if they are in cassock and surplice)
- clerics in minor orders in the chancel
- congregation

¹⁴ Th should never give the thurible to the MC while he is still on the predella, as this looks extremely tacky, and causes both Th and the MC to stretch their arms to accomplish this ungainly motion.

¹⁵ The rubricans are in agreement with this: It is the thurifer's office to hold the thurible during the reading of the Gospel, and not the MC's.

¹⁶ This is unanimously agreed upon by all of the rubricans. This is a practical consideration for the reader of the Gospel, be he the celebrant or the deacon; an over abundance of incense makes it very difficult for the reader to chant without choking or coughing.

¹⁷ If Th knows that there will not be a sermon immediately after the Gospel, he should start his second batch of charcoals for the Offertory during the reading of the Epistle.

¹⁸ Th should bring a stool out of the sacristy during the sermon and return it when he leaves the sanctuary. In this way, his motions in and out of the sacristy will not be impeded during Mass.

¹⁹ This is very practical, as it saves Th time, that would be otherwise lost by his walking to each side of the sanctuary, and it is also cleaner looking, as it prevents excess motion from taking place.

IF THERE ARE TORCHBEARERS

- after incensing the various personages, Th will take position in the center of the chancel, ensure that the Tbs are lined up correctly, and then signal a genuflection for himself and the Tbs.
- Th will then lead the Tbs to the sacristy (where the torches are located)
- when the Tbs are positioned and ready, and C has begun the *Sanctus*, Th will then lead the Tbs back into the sanctuary, taking his position in the center of the *recta linea* formation of Tbs.
- when all of the Tbs have arrived, Th signals all to genuflect and then to kneel.
- Th then returns to his normal position

HANC IGITUR

- when the bell is rung for the *Hanc igitur*, Th has Ac2 (or the boatbearer if there is one) impose one spoonful of incense, closes the thurible, puts the boat on the credence, and then takes position at the foot of the Epistle side of the altar steps (or the Epistle “angle”, if there is one)

CONSECRATION

- when the MC signals for all to kneel (which should be at the *Qui pridie*), Th kneels in his position in unison with the other servers
- during the Consecration action, Th bows for each time C genuflects, and incenses the Sacred Species each time They are elevated with three doubles. During the entire action, Th should keep the thurible at readiness by having the chains in his right and left hand as he did for the entire Offertory Incensations
- after the Consecration action has ended, and the MC has signaled for the servers to stand, Th then returns to his normal position

PATER NOSTER

- after Th has turned and bowed for “*Oremus*,” and C has begun the *Pater noster*, Th then makes a single knee genuflection, and then returns the thurible to the sacristy
- Th then returns to his normal position, again making a single knee genuflection upon returning

DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNION

- after C has consumed the Sacred Host, Th then goes to the credence and retrieves the Communion plate, holding it in front of him, and facing plate-side up (not against his chest)
- when the acolytes go to change the Communion rail cloth over, Th then goes with the Crossbearer to the foot, taking his position on the far right side of the foot.
- when all are in position, the MC then signals for all to genuflect and then kneel
- when C consumes the Precious Blood, Th makes a simple bow in unison with the other servers, and then recites the second *Confiteor* with the other servers. During this time, Th does not strike his breast for each *mea culpa*, nor does he sign himself with the Cross, since he is holding the plate.
- after the *Indulgentiam*, Th stands, genuflects, ascends to the predella and kneels in unison with the other servers
- during the *Domine non sum dignus*, again, Th does not strike his breast, because he is holding the plate
- after all the servers on the predella have received Communion, and the MC and C have descended to the foot, Th signals all to stand, then he turns towards the altar (left), and signals all to genuflect at the foot.
- then Th leads all to the Epistle side of the sanctuary in single file, taking his place in his normal position, and the signals all to kneel. Th remains in this position throughout the distribution of Communion.

DURING THE ABLUTIONS

- when C has closed the tabernacle, and the MC signals all to stand, Th goes to the foot, genuflects and then proceeds to the center of the chancel. Th ensures that the Tbs are lined up correctly, signals all to genuflect, and then leads them into the sacristy as before.
- when the Tbs have deposited their torches, Th leads them back into the sanctuary, ensures they are all in proper formation, signals a genuflection, and then returns to his normal position.

LAST GOSPEL

If incense is not imposed for the recessional (e.g., if the *Asperges* preceded the Mass):

- after Th has signed himself at the beginning of the Last Gospel, Th goes to the center of the chancel and takes his position there without genuflecting.
- Th genuflects when C does during the Last Gospel.

If incense is imposed for the recessional (this is only done if incense was used for the processional):

- Th enters the sanctuary from the sacristy with the thurible filled with lit charcoals and takes position near the Epistle side of the foot.
- After genuflecting during the Last Gospel, he meets the MC at the center of the foot, incense is imposed and blessed as usual, then Th goes to the center of the chancel and awaits the MC's signal to genuflect with the rest of the servers.

RECESSIONAL

- upon the MC's signal, Th genuflects in unison with the other servers, and then leads the recessional formation back into the sacristy.
- if he is carrying the thurible, he moderately swings the thurible as he did for the processional.
- Th then takes up the position that he held in the sacristy just before the beginning of Mass. Th bows to the processional cross upon the MC's signal, then to C, and then kneels for C's blessing.

AFTER MASS DUTIES

- Th removes his surplice immediately before performing his after Mass duties²⁰ and then properly puts away all of the items that he used connected with his position. If necessary, Th should sweep around the area in which he was working with the charcoals.

²⁰ It is recommended that in churches where a chapter of the Archconfraternity of St. Stephen has been established, the prescribed prayers of the Guild should be recited by all of the servers as a group at the foot of the altar ten minutes before the start of Mass, and immediately after the blessing in the sacristy (after the recessional musical piece has been completed).