

“Johan’s an excellent teacher. He balances an engaging wit with rich expression. He connects reason and understanding with historical hinges. He gives me more than I asked but everything I needed to really comprehend. Delightful and engaging. I kept saying, again and again, ‘Let me read just one more question and then I’ll put it down.’ He’s like an uncle, a professor, and an actor. He’s warm and engaging, knows his stuff and presents it in an entertaining and engaging manner.”

—Leland Nagel, Executive Director
National Conference for Catechetical Leadership

“Who says that liturgical catechesis has to be dull and grueling? Based on a series of magazine columns by Johan van Parys, *What’s the Smoke For?* is a down-to-earth blend of etiquette and erudition on matters liturgical. Consisting of ninety-one questions and answers in areas such as liturgical art and architecture, prayer and devotions, furniture and objects, posture and gestures, vesture and the keeping of seasons, I would highlight the author’s treatment of liturgical praxis and theology as especially helpful. Highly recommended for clergy, seminarians, and liturgical ministers (as well as parish secretaries who may be looking for material to fill out the weekend bulletin).”

—Fr. Jan Michael Joncas
Artist in Residence and Research Fellow in Catholic Studies
University of St. Thomas

“Johan van Parys uses an engaging and simple question-and-answer format to teach basic liturgical theology and provide historical background for the art and architecture, rituals and symbols, prayers and practices of the Catholic Church. This book demonstrates that Catholic liturgy was never unchanging, but has always been shaped by particular historical eras with their varied spiritualities and cultures. The author’s personal memories will help readers to experience vicariously some of the liturgical rituals with which they may not be familiar.”

—Delores Dufner, a member of St. Benedict’s Monastery in
St. Joseph, MN, is a widely published author of liturgical
hymn texts

What's the Smoke For?

*And Other Burning Questions
about the Liturgy*

Johan van Parys



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Introduction

A long time ago I became aware of an interesting Buddhist story. I have used it many times, taking the liberty to translate it into a Catholic context. My version of the story is set in the fourteenth century in a French abbey. Jehan, who grew up on a nearby farm, recently entered the abbey. He was very happy but missed his cat. One day, while on a walk, he fortuitously ran into his beloved cat. Jehan quickly hid the cat under his habit and made his way back to the abbey. As fate will have it, he ran into the abbot. Noticing that something was awry, the abbot asked him about his whereabouts. Jehan was so nervous that he squeezed the cat too tightly and, in pain, the cat meowed. Having been exposed, the novice fell to his knees, begged for forgiveness, and brazenly asked for permission to keep the cat. To his surprise, the abbot agreed on the condition that the cat not interfere with their monastic life. All was well until one day the cat walked into the church during evening prayer and jumped on the abbot's lap. Annoyed by the incident, the abbot ordered Jehan to tie up the cat before evening prayer. Dutifully, the young monk found the cat every day and tied it up so the monks would not be disturbed during evening prayer. Even after the election of a new abbot, Jehan, now a full-fledged monk, continued to tie up the cat before evening prayer began. On the day the cat passed away, the new abbot promptly sent Jehan to the market to buy a new cat so he could tie it up in order for evening prayer to begin.

Many of us have grown up immersed in our Catholic traditions. Often we don't know why we do what we do, yet we keep on doing it. It is good to occasionally pause and ponder a question or two so we don't end up mindlessly buying a cat so we can tie it up in order for evening prayer to begin.

What's the Smoke For? intends to offer you just that, the opportunity to ponder ninety-one questions pertaining to the liturgy. The inspiration for this book is the *Ask Johan* column that has been part of *Basilica*, the magazine of the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis, since 1998.

That year I was asked by Margaret Nelson, one of the founding editors of *Basilica*, to write a recurring column. She intended it to be a question-and-answer column. The questions she imagined would come from parishioners. The answers she envisioned to be in a tone reminiscent of both Miss Manners and Bishop Fulton Sheen. She wanted a good theological foundation, accessible language, and the occasional twist so people would actually want to read it. Today *Ask Johan* is still part of *Basilica* and is one of its most popular pages.

When I read through the columns in preparation for this book, I noticed that some questions/answers were too *Basilica* specific. Others had not yet been answered, while some I answered more than once. Just so you know, the most frequently posed question was about incense. Thus, though based on *Ask Johan* and written in the same style, *What's the Smoke For?* is much more than just a compilation of those columns. This book contains questions/answers solicited from a great variety of people, including new and longtime Catholics alike. In the interest of full disclosure I may have inserted an occasional question myself only because I believe it should have been asked.

May I suggest you have a quick read and then keep this book handy? Maybe you can keep it on your desk, in your glove compartment, or even in your purse. You never know when someone will ask you why the monks tie up a cat so evening prayer can begin.

Liturgical Art
and Architecture

Dear Johan,

After Midnight Mass, my daughter asked me what the smoke was all about. Though I know incense is a very Catholic thing, I was unable to answer her question. Can you help me?

Gentle Reader-

First off, it's not just a Catholic thing, it is also an Orthodox thing, and even more so. But, thank you for asking as this seems to be a burning question for many.

Not too long ago I gave a talk on the sensory aspects of the liturgy. Naturally, I sang the praises of the olfactory sense and lauded the use of incense. No sooner was I done than a person sitting in the front row jumped up. Speaking louder than was necessary, she yelled out: "When will the Catholic Church stop smoking?" Then she grabbed her bag and stomped out. I was speechless.

It seems like people either really love incense or absolutely hate it. Very few people are opinion-less when it comes to incense. Admittedly, some individuals are incense-intolerant due to allergies or respiratory conditions. We need to be very considerate of this.

The use of incense is an important element in Catholic liturgy because of historical, theological, and liturgical reasons.

- Historically, we can trace our use of incense back to Jewish religious rites as well as Roman imperial ceremonies.
- Theologically, the use of incense is connected with Psalm 141, which compares our prayers rising up to God with the rising incense used during our prayers: "My prayers rise like incense."

- Liturgically, incense is used as an honorific gesture. In addition, incense is used because of its olfactory qualities.

In recent times we have become more aware of the importance of the senses. Remember, for example, how the slightest whiff of a certain perfume can whisk you off to a totally different place and time, as it reminds you of a certain person or event. Similarly, incense is used as a reminder of the sacred so that every time we smell it we are reminded that we are at prayer. Taking it a step further, some churches use a different kind of incense for each season of the liturgical year, so as to create an olfactory connection between a liturgical season and a liturgical scent. As soon as people smell a certain aroma, they are transported into a certain liturgical season. Thus, liturgical colors, liturgical music, liturgical texts, and liturgical scent mark the liturgical seasons.

Many churches have abandoned the use of incense out of consideration for people who are physically intolerant of it. This is especially the case in smaller churches where there is little or no airflow. Though this is, of course, very important in terms of creating a hospitable liturgical environment, it also results in the loss of an ancient visual and olfactory symbol. Some parishes have worked to improve their airflow systems so they can continue to use incense without irritating some parishioners. Other parishes have declared certain liturgies incense free while retaining the custom in others. Whatever we do, we need to be sensitive both to the comfort of our parishioners as well as to the important legacy of our symbols.

May I ask you, did your daughter love it or hate it? It may give us an insight into the liturgical future of the use of incense.

Dear Johan,

I saw a young woman with crosses as earrings and at least a dozen rosaries and several pectoral crosses around her neck. I was appalled. It seems to me that the cross is the most important symbol of Christianity. How dare she mock it so?

Gentle Reader-

I must have seen the same woman recently, or else this has become an unhappy trend.

Your question reminds me of a scene that played out many years ago. My younger brother came home from university with a small silver crucifix dangling from his ear. Without saying a word, my mom walked over to him and took it (read: yanked it) out of his ear. To this day I am not sure what displeased my mom the most: the fact that he had his ear pierced or the fact that he wore a cross as an earring.

The cross is the most recognizable symbol of Christianity. However, as is the case with many things we now take for granted, it has not always been thus. It took a while before the cross and especially the crucifix or any other depictions of Christ, Mary, and the saints were accepted. Two factors were at play.

First, early Christians displayed a general timidity toward imagery at best and engaged in the occasional full-fledged period of iconoclasm at worst. It was not until the Second Council of Nicea (787) that matters were settled once and for all. After tumultuous debates, this council not only denounced iconoclasm but it also called for the depictions of Christ, Mary, and the saints with the admonition that when one adores an image one really adores the one represented by the image.

Second, the death of Jesus on the cross was neither expected by his followers nor was it readily embraced. Death by crucifixion was one of the worst condemnations. Roman citizens, for example, could not be punished by crucifixion. In a sense, the cross was

experienced as a scandal and an embarrassment. So they concentrated on the resurrection, rather than on the death of Jesus.

Gradually the Christian community came to embrace the scandal of the cross as the mystery of salvation. And by the early third century the cross had become closely associated with Christianity. Clement of Alexandria (150–ca. 215) referred to the cross as *τὸ κυριακὸν σημεῖον* or the Lord's sign. And according to Tertullian (160–220) Christians are *crucis religiosi* or devotees of the cross.

Today the cross is ubiquitous and it is undoubtedly the most recognizable symbol in the entire world. We top our church steeples with crosses. We hang crosses in our homes, in our cars, and around our necks. We even tattoo crosses on our bodies. Most often this is done in good faith and in good taste. Sometimes it is done in a misguided attempt at unfortunate fashion. In some rare and regrettable instances the cross is intentionally desecrated.

Although I can understand why the sight of the young woman may have given you cause for concern, let's take consolation in the fact that by the cross we have been saved and nothing can take that away, not even ill-advised use or malicious abuse.

Dear Johan,

I find some depictions of Jesus on the cross rather disturbing. I can't remember the name of the German artist but his crucifixion was just terrifying. Wouldn't it suffice to just have a cross?

Gentle Reader-

For starters, let's agree that a cross does not have a corpus or depiction of Jesus on it, while a crucifix does. Most Protestant

churches exclusively prefer the use of a cross while the Catholic church favors the crucifix.

The crucifix you are referring to must be one by Matthias Grünewald (ca. 1470–1528). His crucifixion scenes are indeed rather gruesome and difficult to behold. However, they do make a point.

Like you, Christians have struggled with the depiction of Jesus on the cross from the very beginning. As a result they were very hesitant to use what later became the most recognizable Christian symbol of them all. Instead they used Christ monograms, anchors, a fish, a shepherd. When they timidly started using the cross it was without the corpus. Most often a victory wreath decorated the cross. Though early Christians recognized Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as the portal to salvation, they were hesitant to represent Jesus on the cross.

Starting in the fourth century Christians began slowly to represent Jesus on the cross. However, when they did they depicted Jesus as completely in charge. It is as if he is standing on the cross using a wooden footstool that is attached to the cross. Both hands and both feet are nailed to the cross. His eyes are wide open and he looks directly at the beholder.

The next step was the representation of the suffering Jesus on the cross. Rather than standing on the cross, Jesus hangs from the cross. His feet are placed on one another and one nail is used for both feet. His body shows signs of torture. He often wears the crown of thorns as described in the gospels. This type of crucifix appears during the time of state decline after the fall of the Roman and Carolingian empires. Europe sank into the so-called dark ages, which were characterized by political anarchy, war and violence, famine, and diseases such as the plague that decimated more than half the population. The people's feelings of despair and suffering are clearly reflected in the way they depicted Christ. In a sense they depicted their own suffering on the cross or they took consolation in connecting their suffering to that of Jesus.

The Renaissance with its interest in realism keeps depicting the suffering Christ but with less of the exaggerated gore so typical for

many of the medieval depictions. Although Christ is still shown as dying on the cross, there is a quality of stillness surrounding the cross. Although there is realism in the depiction, there is also rational restraint.

The Baroque renditions, which are part of the Counter-Reformation efforts of the Catholic Church, are all about the drama of the moment as they show Longinus, one of the Roman soldiers, piercing the side of Jesus. Mary, the mother of Jesus, faints into the arms of John, the beloved, and Mary of Magdala embraces the foot of the cross. The sacrifice of the cross is greatly emphasized in these depictions in support of the theology of the sacrifice of the Mass, which is often celebrated beneath them.

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which are characterized by a return to earlier artistic styles, embrace the medieval depiction in the Romanesque and Gothic style but these neo-versions lack the character of the images they imitate. Rather there is a romantic softness and a form of spiritualization in the crucifixes that are typical for the piety of this period.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have all of the above and much more. Though there was a clear trend in the Catholic Church to move away from the crucifix in favor of a cross or a risen Christ on a cross, new directives indicate that a crucifix needs to be placed in each sanctuary and processional crosses need to actually be processional crucifixes.

This is probably more than you asked for. I could have answered with a simple no but what good would that have done?