

Pot Of Incense

Unknown

Just when the pot of incense became an emblem of the third section of the Sublime Degree can not be stated with certainty. It is, apparently, an American invention or addition; both McKensie and Kenning say that it is not used in the English work. The Monitor of Thomas Smith Webb, who worked such ingenious and cunning changes in the Prestonian work, gives the commonly accepted wording:

“The Pot of Incense is an emblem of a pure heart; this 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 and beneficent author of our existence for the manifold blessings and comforts we enjoy.”

Jeremy Cross prints it among the delightfully quaint illustrations in the “True Masonic Chart” – illustrations which were from the not altogether uninspired pencil of one Amos Doolittle, of New Haven.

However the Pot of Incense came into American rituals, it is present in nearly all, and in substantially the same form, both pictorially and monetarily. If the incense has no great antiquity in the Masonic system, its use dates from the earliest, and clings to it from later, Biblical times, and in Egypt and India it has an even greater antiquity.

In the very early days, as chronicled in the Bible, incense was associated more with idolatry than with true worship; for instance:

Because they have forsaken men and have burned incense unto other Gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be poured out upon this place, and shall not be quenched. (II Chronicles, 25-34).

To what purpose cometh there to me incense from Sheba, and the sweet cane from a far country? your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me. (Jeremiah 6-20).

Moreover I will cause to cease in Moab, saith the Lord, him that offereth in the high places, and him that burneth incense to his Gods. (Jeremiah 35-48).

However, when the worship of JHVH (Which we call Jehova) was thoroughly established, burning incense changed from a heathenish, idolatrous custom to a great respectability and a place in the Holy of Holies. Leviticus 12-16, 13 sounds this keynote:

And he take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil:

And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, that he dieth not.

Later, incense was associated with wealth and luxurious living, as in the Song of Solomon:

Who is it that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the powders of the merchant? (3-6)

Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense. (406).

Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon. Spikenard and saffron; caslamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices. (4-14).

In ancient Egypt incense was much used; sculptures and monuments of remote dynasties bear testimony to its popularity. Many a Pharaoh is depicted with censor in one hand, the other casting into it the oastils or osselets of incense. In embalming the Egyptians used all the various gums and spices "except" frankincense, which was set apart and especially consecrated to the worship of the Gods.

In India incense has always been a part of the worship of the thousands of Gods and Goddesses of that strange land. Buddhism has continued its use to this day as a part of the ceremonies of worship – as, indeed, have some Christian churches – and in Nepal, Tibet, Ceylon, Burma, China and Japan it is a commonplace in many temples.

The list of materials which can be incorporated into incense is very long; the incense of the Bible is of more than one variety, there being a distinction between incense and frankincense, although a casual reading of these two terms in many Biblical references makes them seem to be any sacrificial smoke of a pleasant odor. Ordinarily it was made of various vegetable substances of high pungency; opobalsamun, onycha, galbanum and sometimes pure frankincense also, mixed in equal proportion with some salt. Frankincense, a rare gum, is often coupled with myrrh as an expensive and therefore highly admiring and complimentary gift; recall the Wise Men before the infant Jesus:

"And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his Mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they opened their treasures, they presented him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2-11)."

Where or how the use of incense arose, of course is a sealed mystery as far as evidence goes. Modern science, however, enables a reasonable guess to be made.

Of the five senses, smell is the most closely associated with memory and mood. To neither sight nor sound does the emotional part of personality respond as it does to odor. The scent of certain flowers so surely spells grief to many that they will leave a room in which tube roses or lilies fill the air with scent. Certain odors are so intimately identified with certain experiences that they become for all time pleasant, or the reverse; few who have smelled ether or iodoform from personal experience in hospitals enjoy these, in themselves not unpleasant smells; any man who has loved outdoor life and camping cannot smell wood smoke without being homesick for the streams and fields; he who made love to his lady in lilac time is always sentimental when he again sniffs that perfume, and the high church votary is uplifted by the smell of incense.

In the ceremonials of ancient Israel doubtless the first use of incense was protection against unpleasant odors associated with the slaughtering of cattle and scorching of flesh in the burnt offering. At first, but an insurance against discomfort, incense speedily became associated with religious rites. Today men neither kill nor offer flesh at an altar, but only the perfume of “frankincense and myrrh.”

The Masonic pot of incense is intimately associated with prayer, but its symbolic significance is not a Masonic invention.

Psalms 141-2 reads: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” Revelations 8-3 reads: “And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.”

The association of a sweet smell in the air, which scattered after it gave pleasure with prayers to an Unseen Presence is easy to understand, even that it arose in primitive minds. Prayer was offered and rose on high – so its utterers hoped. It was never seen of men. It returned not. Its very giving gave pleasure. These statements are as true of burning incense as of prayer.

What is less obvious, although the ritual is plain enough on the subject, is that it is not only incense, but a “pot” which is the Masonic symbol. If the sweet savor of incense is like unto a prayer, so is the pot from which it comes like unto the human heart which prays.

Now prayer may come from an impure as well as from a pure heart. But incense is invariably sweet in smell, and so the pot from which it comes is an emblem of a heart pure, sweet and unsullied.

Just what “purity” is as applied to a heart is a moot question. Very unfortunately the word “pure” has been debased – the word is used advisedly – in certain dogmas to mean “ignorant” – as a “pure” young girl; a “pure” woman. According to this definition a female may be a virago,

a cheat, a liar, slander her neighbors, steal, even commit a murder; but, if she is a virgin, she is “pure.”

Masonically, the word means nothing of the kind. In 1921 M.W. George H. Dern, Past Grand Master of Utah (Now Secretary of War) contributed some thoughts on “Monitorial Symbolism of the Third Degree and Its Application to Everyday Life” to columns of “The Builder.” Originally written for the Committee on Masonic Education of the Grand Lodge of Utah, these paragraphs were at once so practical and so pungent that the (then) great Masonic Journal gave them wider circulation.

Quoting the Ritual about the Pot of Incense, M.W. Brother Dern said:

“A sentiment so lofty is not easily applied to the practical, prosaic events of a busy day. To have a pure heart is to be true to yourself, true to your best ideals, and honest with your thoughts. “To Thine Own Self Be True... Thou Canst Not Then Be False To Any Man.” Living a life of deceit and double-dealing never made anyone happy. Riches or pleasures acquired in that way bring only remorse, and eventually the soul cries out in anguish for that peace of mind which is man’s most precious possession, and which is the companion of a pure heart.

“Purity of heart means conscientiousness, and that means sincerity. Without sincerity there can be no real character. But sincerity alone is not enough. There must go with it a proper degree of intelligence and love of one’s fellows. For example, a man may believe that the emotion of pity and the desire to relieve the necessities of others is intrinsically noble and elevating, and he indulges in indiscriminate giving, without realizing the evil consequences, in the way of fraud, laziness and inefficiency and habitual dependence that his ill considered acts produce upon those whom he intends to benefit. Again, a man may be perfectly sincere in talking about the shortcomings of another, and he may justify himself by saying that he is telling nothing but the truth. But, merely because they are true is no reason why unpleasant and harmful things should be told. To destroy a reputation is no way to aid a brother who has erred. Better far overlook his mistakes, and extend him a helping hand.

“Without multiplying examples, let it be understood that the truly conscientious man must not simply be sincere, but he must have high ideals and standards, and moreover, he must not be satisfied with those standards. Rather he must revise them from time to time, and that means self-examination, to see if he possesses the love and courage that must go with sincerity in order to make progress in building character. For in this direction again there must be constant progress. To be content with what we have accomplished is fatal. As James A. Garfield once said, “I must do something to keep my thoughts fresh and growing. I dread nothing so much as falling into a rut and feeling myself becoming a fossil.”

Many words in the ritual have changed meanings since they were first used. The Masonic term “profane,” for instance, originally meant “without the temple” – one not initiated, not of the

craft. Today it means blasphemous, which is no part of the Masonic definition of the word. “Sacrifice” in our Monitor seems to come under this classification.

In the Old Testament, a sacrifice before the altar was the offering of something – burned flesh, burning incense, pure oil or wine – which involved the sacrificer giving something valuable to him; the sacrifice was an evidence before all men that the sacrificer valued his kinship with the Most High more than his possession of that which he offered.

In our ritual the word has lost this significance. The pot of incense as an emblem of a pure heart “which is always an acceptable sacrifice to the Deity” can hardly connote the idea that a Mason desires to keep his “pure heart” for himself, but because of love of God is willing to give it up. Rather does it denote that he who gives up worldly pleasures, mundane ideas and selfish cravings which may interfere with “purity of life and conduct” as set forth in other parts of the ritual, does that which is acceptable to the Great Architect.

Masonically, “pure” seems to mean honest, sincere, genuine, real, without pretense and “sacrifice” to denote that which is pleasing to the most high.

So read, the Masonic pot of incense becomes an integral part of the philosophy of Freemasonry, and not a mere moral interjection in the emblems of the third degree. For all of the magnificent body of teaching which is self revealed, half concealed in the symbolism of Freemasonry, nothing stands out more plainly, or calls with a louder voice, than her insistence on these simple yet profound virtues of the human heart lumped together in one phrase as “a man of higher character” ...in other words, one with a “pure heart,” “pure” meaning undefiled by the faults and frailties of so many of the children of men.

STB – May 1953