

21 April 2020
Pastoral Nature Notes
Father Joseph Backowski

Glorified Charcoal?

I never thought I'd be writing about charcoal, yet soon many of us will have charcoal burning in our grills and cooking our food. Making charcoal is a very ancient practice. In short it is made by burning wood in a low oxygen environment and then stopping the burning process before the wood turns to ash. You might say then, why not just burn the wood. Well, charcoal provides a hotter, more even fire. Charcoal was used regularly by blacksmiths up until the present for the very same reasons. Charcoal fires are extremely interesting! There is very little flame. The glow slowly increases as oxygen is provided and the glimmer from the glow dances upon the ashen surfaced charcoal. Charcoal is beautiful sign of the mercy the Lord desires to show us and his glorification he wishes to show us. Charcoal is a very scriptural thing. In Isaiah 6 Isaiah explains his call to serve the Lord. Isaiah expresses his uncleanness to bring the Lord's message to the people of Judah. God purifies him by sending an Angel with a burning coal to touch his lips to purify him. Charcoal shows up again in John Chapter 18 during Jesus' Passion. Remember Peter was the apostle who fell at Jesus feet and said depart from me for I am a sinful man. We see his weakness when before that charcoal fire outside the High Priest's residence where Peter denies Jesus three times. Charcoal shows up again in John 21 after the resurrection when Jesus appears to the disciples and cooks breakfast for them over a charcoal fire. This meal for early Christians was a sign of the Eucharist. Jesus setting before them the nourishment of himself that he prepared. Then Jesus asks Peter before that Charcoal fire if he loved him three times. After the third time, Peter is distressed because He realizes Jesus is purifying him of his denial! Charcoal, black, oxygen starved wood. Charcoal fires, of course, smell very good better than a regular old wood fire. As a result, charcoal also holds a quiet place in our worship. For thousands of Years the Jews used charcoal with incense in the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah in Luke: Chapter 1 would probably have used charcoal as a base fuel for incense. Revelation 8 has a both the beauty of burning coals producing smoke before the throne of God and being used to purify the earth below. Many probably do not even realize that whenever we use

incense in the Sacred Liturgy, charcoal is used to make the base fire for the very same reasons it was used for cooking, heat, and blacksmithing in the ancient world. Yet while supporting the liturgy by holding the fire to burn the incense the charcoal is a black, yet a beautiful sign of how when we allow Christ to purify us and make us glow he can then pour his graces on us like the priest pours incense on the burning coal and then we become a beautiful fragrance billowing upward toward God. Charcoal is so much like us as weak human beings. We have sinned like Peter. We have cut ourselves off from God in different ways, black as charcoal, but when we open ourselves up to the Lord again, especially in the Eucharistic breakfast he prepares for us on Sunday Morning, we begin to evenly glow and our souls can dance in freedom when we have been freed from sin. Our very existence becomes a pleasing and joyful fragrance before God! Happy Easter!