

**“What Makes Holy Water Holy?”**  
**Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water”**  
**Talk for the 2019 Sacred Liturgy Conference: “The Living Water of the Eucharist”**  
**May 30, 2019; Spokane, WA**

## **Introduction**

If you are a “cradle Catholic”, you probably had this experience, although perhaps too young to remember it. Even so, you may have seen the same thing happen to others: a young mother in the vestibule of the church, dipping her toddler’s finger into the holy water font and teaching her child to make the Sign of the Cross with it. The blessing of oneself with holy water upon entering church is one of the most common Catholic practices. It is so familiar to us as to almost be automatic. And yet, how rich in symbolism that simple gesture is!

The Sign of the Cross invokes the fundamental mysteries of our faith: the Most Holy Trinity, and how the triune God revealed Himself as such in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Making the Sign of the Cross with holy water recalls our Baptism into the Paschal Mystery, and doing so as we enter the church where the community gathers to celebrate the holy Eucharist is a tangible manifestation of the ecclesial reality of salvation, and it expresses the unity between those two great sacraments.

## **Overview**

In my reflection this morning I would like to consider how the “living water of the Eucharist” finds expression in the blessing and use of holy water. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers a rich and profound insight into the relationship between Baptism and Eucharist, a relationship that finds expression every time we bless ourselves with holy water upon entering the church:

*What Makes Holy Water Holy? Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water*

The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist [CCC 1617].

We recall how Christ, the new Adam, gave birth to the new Eve as he slept in death on the Cross. In a beautiful selection from the *Catecheses* of St. John Chrysostom that we read on Good Friday, we are told:

I said that water and blood symbolized baptism and the holy Eucharist. From these two sacraments the Church is born: from baptism, *the cleansing water that gives rebirth and renewal through the Holy Spirit*, and from the holy Eucharist. Since the symbols of baptism and the Eucharist flowed from his side, it was from his side that Christ fashioned the Church, as he had fashioned Eve from the side of Adam.<sup>1</sup>

St. Paul for his part teaches how intimately intertwined the realities of Baptism and Eucharist are in connection with the Exodus:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and drank the same supernatural drink.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Catecheses* 3, 13-19 (Office of Readings, Good Friday).

For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ [1 Cor 10:1-4].

How does our Catholic liturgical tradition associate holy water with the Eucharist? I would like to respond to this question by considering three topics: the blessing of holy water in connection with the Sunday Eucharist; the association of the blessing of holy water with the great feasts of Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany; and a comparison of the rites of blessing water apart from the Eucharistic celebration in the *Rituale Romanum* and the *Book of Blessings*.

### **The Blessing of Water at the Sunday Eucharist**

In both the Ordinary and Extraordinary Form of the Mass, provision is made for the blessing of water, a ceremony that goes back to the ninth century.<sup>2</sup> I will review the liturgical rite in each form. As we shall see later, it will be even more instructive to compare the rite for blessing water in the *Missal* with the prayers provided for this in the *Book of Blessings*.

In the Extraordinary Form, strictly speaking the rite of blessing water and sprinkling is a preparation *before* the principal Sunday Mass. The blessing can take place in the church or in the sacristy, although the rubric implies that it is carried out in the sacristy (“On Sunday, salt and the water to be blessed are prepared in the sacristy”). The celebrant is not vested in a chasuble, and the rite is given as an Appendix at the end of the *Missale Romanum*, not in the Ordinary of the Mass. The same ritual is to be used whenever holy water is blessed, and in fact this is the first blessing provided in the *Rituale Romanum*. As I just referenced, the rite specifies that water is blessed on Sunday (with exceptions to be noted below), so it seems the presumption is that all

---

<sup>2</sup> The earliest reference may be an instruction given by Pope Leo IV (847-855) that each priest bless water every Sunday before Mass and sprinkle the people with it (PL CXV:679).

*What Makes Holy Water Holy? Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water*

the holy water used during the week is ordinarily blessed in connection with the Sunday Eucharist.

Here is the basic structure of the rite:

- Exorcism and blessing of salt
- Exorcism and blessing of water
- Blessed salt is put into the water
- Blessing of water
- The celebrant sprinkles the altar, himself, the ministers, and the people

Antiphon: *Asperges me*, with a verse from Psalm 50 (51)

Paschaltide: *Vidi aquam*, with a verse from Psalm 117 (118)

- Concluding prayer for God to send an angel to protect and visit all assembled
- The faithful are encouraged to take holy water home to sprinkle the sick, their homes, vineyards, and the like; and to have fonts in various rooms in their house

I will now turn to the rite as given in the Ordinary Form, noting similarities and differences.

*When?*

Whereas the EF has the blessing only before the principal Mass on every Sunday, the OF suggests that on Sundays, especially in Easter Time, this rite can take place “from time to time”, even in Masses anticipated on Saturday evenings. In the EF, the blessing and

*What Makes Holy Water Holy? Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water*

sprinkling takes place only at the principal Mass, but every Sunday; in the OF, it can happen at any (and all?) Mass(es) on a given Sunday, but is not required.

*Where?*

Unlike the EF, the rite for blessing and sprinkling is an integral part of the Mass: it is done at the chair, and takes the place of the Penitential Act.

*Why?*

The association with Baptism is made explicit, especially in the invitation to prayer addressed by the celebrant to the people.

*How?*

Here is the basic structure of the rite:

- Invitation to prayer, asking God to bless the water, which will be sprinkled on us as a memorial of our Baptism
- Blessing of water (three options, one of which is proper to Easter Time)
- Optional blessing of salt, which can then be put into the water
- The celebrant sprinkles himself, the ministers, and the assembly

Antiphon: *Asperges me*, with a verse from Psalm 50 (51)

Paschaltide: *Vidi aquam*, with a verse from Psalm 117 (118)

(other antiphons are also provided)

*What Makes Holy Water Holy? Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water*

- Concluding prayer asking God to cleanse us of our sins and through the celebration of the Eucharist make us worthy to share at the table in his kingdom
- No mention is made of the people bringing the blessed water home with them

What are the similarities? In both rites God is asked to bless the water, and the water is in fact blessed. (That may seem obvious, but we will find something quite different in the *Book of Blessings*.) In both rites there is reference to holy water protecting us from evil influences, although this idea is more pronounced in the EF. In both rites there are references to purification and to the Paschal Mystery, above all in the antiphons used during the sprinkling: Psalm 50 (51), the penitential psalm *par excellence*, and Psalm 117 (118), the most important Easter psalm. In both rites salt is added to the water, although this is optional in the OF.

What are the differences? The most significant change in the OF is the exclusion of prayers of exorcism over the salt and water, although the prayer used to bless the salt is inspired by the prayer of exorcism of salt used in the EF. I will return to this omission later. The OF ceremony is more clearly integrated into the liturgy, and it explicitly connects the rite with both Baptism and Eucharist. The importance of water in the whole drama of salvation history is expressed beautifully in the blessing to be used in Easter Time. Finally, no mention is made in the OF of the faithful bringing water home with them. It seems that the blessed water is used only for the rite of sprinkling.

By way of conclusion to this first part of my presentation, I would like to quote from Philip Weller, whose translation of the blessings in the *Roman Ritual* was very popular in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council:

Baptism and Eucharist have been from earliest Christian times a special work for Sundays. When we come together on the Lord's day to celebrate His praises in Eucharistic worship, we reflect that our baptism is an ever-present fact in our souls. Thus, before treading into the holy of holies of Eucharistic sacrifice and communion, we commemorate and renew that sublime mystery by which Mother Church has brought us forth out of her womb, the baptismal font, unto life within the Kingdom of God upon earth.<sup>3</sup>

In both the EF and OF, the "living water of the Eucharist" finds expression in the rite for blessing and sprinkling water at Mass.

### **The Blessing of Water on Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany**

Father Weller's edition of the *Roman Ritual*, published in 1946, stipulates that there are two Sundays when water is not blessed: Easter and Pentecost. This is because on the vigils of those days the font is blessed, in commemoration of an ancient Roman practice of conferring Baptism only on those two feasts. We are familiar with the great Easter Vigil, but the idea of a baptismal vigil at Pentecost might surprise us. In fact, there was one until recently: it omitted the blessing of the Paschal fire and candle, but otherwise resembled the Easter Vigil, including a blessing of the baptismal font. This entire Vigil was removed in the reforms of 1955. However, we find a slight trace of it remaining in the (post-1955) EF, which retains the prayer for the newly baptized in the *Hanc igitur* of the Roman Canon on Pentecost and its octave. Although the baptismal aspect of the Pentecost Vigil is gone, the current OF Vigil Mass of Pentecost offers

---

<sup>3</sup> Philip T. Weller (tr.), *The Roman Ritual in Latin and English with Rubrics and Planechant [sic] Notation* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1946), p 12-13.

*What Makes Holy Water Holy? Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water*

the option of an extended Liturgy of the Word modeled on the pattern of reading/psalm/collect familiar to us from the Easter Vigil.

Weller's *Ritual* also contains a blessing of water on the Vigil of Epiphany, which is not connected with the celebration of the Eucharist. This rite was only approved in 1890, and efforts were made in the early part of the twentieth century to suppress it. The idea of blessing water at Epiphany comes from the East, although the rite given has little in common with the elaborate, impressive "blessing of the waters" that is celebrated in the Byzantine liturgy. The rite approved in 1890 is simply an expansion of the usual blessing of holy water on Sunday, including the Litany of Saints, several psalms and canticles, and the *Te Deum*. Apart from an antiphon, there is no reference to the Baptism of the Lord.

Very different in this regard is the solemn blessing of waters in the East. While the Epiphany celebration in the West tends to focus on the Magi, the Byzantine Feast of the Theophany centers on the Baptism of the Lord. For this reason, the sacrament of Baptism was administered on this feast as far back as the fourth century. In the West, of course, we do also have a Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, one of the traditional three "Epiphanies" or "Theophanies" – key moments in the life of our Lord in which the glory of his divinity appeared: the visit of the Magi, his Baptism, and his miracle at the Wedding Feast of Cana. It is quite noteworthy, moreover, that Pope St. John Paul II – who was from a Slavic country – began the custom of the Pope celebrating baptisms on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Returning now to the East, the "Blessing of the Jordan" is a reenactment of Christ's Baptism, and is sometimes carried out in a river or stream. Following three biblical readings (Isaiah 35:1-10; 55:1-13; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4; Mark 1:9-11) there is a prayer for peace with a special petition for God to sanctify the waters by the descent of the Holy Spirit. This is followed

by a lengthy prayer for the consecration of the water, attributed to St. Sophronius (seventh century). The celebrant blesses the water with a triple candle, dipping it into the water three times in commemoration of Christ's Baptism. Breathing three times on the water in a sign of the cross to invoke the Holy Spirit, he then makes the Sign of the Cross in the water three times asking God to sanctify the water by his Holy Spirit. The prayer ends with a threefold immersion of the cross into the water. With some of the water that has been blessed he sprinkles the altar, the walls of the church, and the faithful. People bring the water home, a practice mentioned by St. John Chrysostom, and, following a venerable Eastern tradition they also drink the holy water.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that the gestures formerly associated with the blessing of water at our Western Easter Vigil (regrettably, suppressed) are in fact something we had in common with the liturgical traditions of the East. These included the priest doing the following: touching the water with his hand, making the Sign of the Cross in the water three times, breathing on the water, lowering the Paschal Candle into the water three times, pouring into the water the Oil of Catechumens in the form of a cross and then the Oil of Chrism in the same way and then pouring both of them into the water together making the Sign of the Cross with them. The prayer was quite long and complex, which, it would seem, led to the desire for simplification, certainly consistent with the thinking concerning liturgical reform at the time. But one cannot help but wonder if the reform of this ritual went too far, with the prayer too greatly abbreviated and

---

<sup>4</sup> Variants of this Eastern ceremony were in fact celebrated in some places in the West, notably in southern Italy and in parts of Germany. For an interesting description of such a rite witnessed in Rome before 1890, see: John, Marquess of Bute and E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Blessing of the Waters on the Eve of the Epiphany: the Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Russian Versions, Edited or Translated from the Original Texts* (London: Henry Frowde, 1901), p 1-46.

deprived of profound symbolic meaning (only the insertion of the Paschal Candle once or three times is retained, and even this is qualified by the rubric “if appropriate”).

Before concluding our examination of the blessing of water at Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany, we should also note that in both the East and the West there is a tradition of blessing homes at Epiphany, and in the West a tradition of blessing homes at Easter. The water brought from the church where the great mysteries of our redemption have just been celebrated is used to sanctify the home: this is a tangible expression of how the “living water of the Eucharist” irrigates the soil of our daily lives.

### **The Blessing of Holy Water apart from Mass**

Now let us consider our third theme, the blessing of water apart from Mass. In the case of the EF, this is very simple: the *Rituale Romanum* uses the same prayers employed for the Sunday blessing of water before the principal Mass. In the OF, the *Book of Blessings* has a rite for blessing water that is totally unrelated to the blessings provided in the *Roman Missal* – unrelated, and in fact novel. When speaking of the blessing of water at the OF Sunday Mass, I noted that the celebrant asks God to bless the water, and then proceeds to give a blessing that makes the water holy. This is not so in the *Book of Blessings*: in fact, the water itself is not blessed at all! While the words of introduction allude to the idea that the water will be blessed (“The blessing of this water reminds of Christ, the living water ...”), none of the three options for the prayer of blessing actually asks God to bless the water. How did this come about?

We must begin our exploration by recalling that holy water is a sacramental. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Sacramentals are instituted for the sanctification of certain ministries of the church, certain states of life, a great variety of circumstances in Christian

life, and the use of many things helpful to man” (CCC 1668). Further elaborating on this teaching, and quoting the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the Catechism states:

Sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church’s prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it. ‘For well-disposed members of the faithful, the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals sanctifies almost every event of their lives with the divine grace which flows from the Paschal mystery of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. From this source all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power. There is scarcely any proper use of material things which cannot be thus directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God’ [CCC 1670].

Unlike the seven sacraments, sacramentals were not instituted by Christ, nor do they bestow grace *ex opere operato*. They are customs, ceremonies, and objects that are part of the broader sacramental reality of the Church. Their efficacy depends on the prayer of the Church and the dispositions of the one using them – the bestowal of grace is mediated *ex opere operantis* (“from the work of the one doing the work”, rather than the work itself which was done). Because sacramentals are instituted by the Church, they can be changed by the Church, and this is exactly what the fathers of the Second Vatican Council called for:

The sacramentals are to undergo a revision which takes into account the primary principle of enabling the faithful to participate intelligently, actively, and easily; the circumstances of our own days must also be considered. When rituals are

revised, as laid down in Art. 63, new sacramentals may also be added as the need for these becomes apparent. Reserved blessings shall be very few; reservations shall be in favor of bishops or ordinaries. Let provision be made that some sacramentals, at least in special circumstances and at the discretion of the ordinary, may be administered by qualified lay persons [SC 79].

The Council directed that three things be kept in mind in undertaking this revision: the active participation of the faithful, regional and cultural differences, and a less restricted understanding of who can administer sacramentals (e.g., lessening the number of reserved blessings and allowing the non-ordained to bless and say prayers in the Church's name). As with the other liturgical reforms enacted by the Council, so here emphasis is placed on communal celebrations with the active participation of the assembly, a greater use of Scripture, and an emphasis on catechesis and preaching.

The revision of the blessings found in the *Roman Ritual* was one of the final works of the post-conciliar reform, and in the process its authors embraced a theological understanding of "blessings" very different from that underlying the *Roman Ritual*.<sup>5</sup> According to this view, a blessing is primarily an act of thanksgiving: giving praise to God for the goodness of creation and the work of salvation. The preeminent example of this of course is the Eucharistic celebration. This affirmation of the inherent goodness of creation explains why exorcisms all but disappeared from the Church's liturgical rites. Whereas in the *Roman Ritual* many objects are exorcised before they are blessed, this is not the case in the *Book of Blessings*.

---

<sup>5</sup> The two principal sources for what follows are: Daniel G. Van Slyke, "The Order for Blessing Water: Past and Present", *Antiphon* 8:2 (2003), 12-23, which may also be found in Uwe Michael Lang (ed.), *The Fullness of Divine Worship: The Sacred Liturgy and its Renewal* (Washington: CUA Press, 2018) p 169-195; and Uwe Michael Lang, "Theologies of Blessing: Origins and Characteristics of *De benedictionibus* (1984) *Antiphon* 15:1 (2011) 27-46.

*What Makes Holy Water Holy? Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water*

We also find in this new approach that blessings are invoked primarily on persons rather than on things or places. In order to understand why this is so, we must bear in mind that traditionally liturgical blessings have been of two types:

1. Constitutive: blessings that set apart persons or things solely for divine service.

These are mentioned in CCC 1672.

2. Invocative: blessings that do not separate, but implore. The effect of such blessings depends on the will of God, the prayer of the Church, and the fervor of the recipient.

In the early Church constitutive blessings were given to such things as the sacred chrism, vessels used for the Eucharist, and holy water. In the Middle Ages, the revisers suggest, such constitutive blessings were extended to other material objects to counteract diabolical powers. Critics of the *Book of Blessings* dispute this assertion, and argue that the blessing of objects not intended for liturgical use is in fact a very ancient practice of the universal Church. Be that as it may, those entrusted with the reform of the Church's ritual blessings were motivated by a desire to affirm the goodness of creation, opposition to superstition sometimes associated with sacramentals, and a desire to emphasize invocative blessings and strictly limit constitutive blessings.

An attentive reader can see the evolution of this understanding in the blessings found in the *Roman Missal* for candles, ashes, and palms. In each case the *Missal* provides two alternatives: a blessing for the object or a blessing for the people who will use the object. By the

*What Makes Holy Water Holy? Reflections on the Rites for the Blessing of Holy Water*

time the revision of the Church's ritual blessings was completed, this latter approach informed the entire *Book of Blessings*, such that its contents are for all practical purposes unprecedented. They are not a revision of the *Rituale Romanum*, they are a replacement of it with texts that are totally new. Not only is there discontinuity with recent and medieval tradition, but also with the practice of the ancient Church, as well as the constant liturgical practice of the Eastern Churches.

What does this mean as regards the blessing of water? Let us review briefly the structure of the rite as given in the *Book of Blessings*:

- Sign of the Cross, greeting, brief catechesis on why we bless water
- Readings from Scripture (a wide variety of texts is given)
- Prayer of Blessing

As I mentioned a moment ago, three forms are given, none of which bless the water, nor even, in an explicit manner, those who will be sprinkled with it.

Rather, the prayers implore God on behalf of the people that they “be refreshed inwardly by the power of the Holy Spirit” or “be renewed in body and spirit.”

- Those present are sprinkled with the water, and a suitable song may be sung.

In my opinion, the revisers made a serious error here: holy water should be subject to a constitutive, not invocative, blessing. It is an object that is clearly set apart for liturgical use. Like the holy oils or a chalice, once this water is blessed it should be treated as something sacred in itself. It is not just ordinary water that reminds us of our Baptism; it is in fact what we call it: *holy water*. It should be handled with reverence and made available to God's people for use in their homes.

Catholic tradition teaches that, when used with faith, holy water takes away venial sin and protects from the assaults of the Evil One.<sup>6</sup> But it can do many other things as well. Here is how one author has expressed the efficacy of holy water:

It is well for everyone to use this sacramental often. We cannot appreciate its efficacy too highly. Its salutary effects consist chiefly in the actual graces which we may obtain by means of it. These are illuminations of the mind and inspirations of the Holy Ghost which help us perform our vocational duties, to pray devoutly, to hear the word of God with profit, and especially to assist with due attention at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Or again, the pious use of Holy Water at times will obtain a deeper knowledge of revealed truths, and help one to see his faults and overcome them. Often, too, such graces will enable one to avoid an occasion of sin or break off a sinful friendship. The practice of blessing oneself with Holy Water will stimulate devotion and dispose the soul for an increase of divine love. These and many other actual graces Holy Water will secure, provided we use it in a spirit of faith and penance.<sup>7</sup>

## **Two Modest Proposals**

If, as I suggest, the current blessing of water in the *Book of Blessings* is deficient, what can be done? On the universal level, perhaps the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments could be petitioned to make a simple change in the *Book of Blessings*. (This is not so audacious as it sounds: in 2002 this Congregation recognized that there

---

<sup>6</sup> E.g., St. Thomas, *ST III*, 65, 1, ad 6.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Houck, *Fountains of Joy or, "By Water and Blood"* (London: B. Herder, 1931) p 139-140.

was a significant lacuna in the *Book of Blessings*, and decreed that any blessing given by an ordained minister must include the Sign of the Cross, even if the text does not call for one.<sup>8</sup>) While retaining the basic structure of the rite as given (a structure which admirably answers to the desiderata of the Council for greater active participation by the community, a more generous use of Scripture, and appropriate catechesis), the “non-blessing blessing” can be replaced with the texts given in the *Roman Missal* for the blessing of water on Sundays. These prayers are in fact constitutive blessings. This substitution would also serve to associate the blessing of water apart from Mass with the liturgical rite used by the Church in her Sunday Eucharistic celebration. There is, in fact, no reason why any of the prayers of blessing of holy water in the *Roman Missal* cannot be used now in place of what is found in the *Book of Blessings*; for that matter, it is also possible to use the prayer from the old *Rituale Romanum*.

Independent of any consideration of the prayer of blessing of holy water outside of Mass, though, I would also suggest that there is another very practical thing we can do now: we can restore the former practice of ordinarily blessing all the holy water needed for a given week at the Sunday Eucharistic celebration. This presumes (which should be the case) that the parish possesses a large, suitable vessel to contain holy water and to make this water available to the faithful. Such a vessel could be placed near the baptismal font, in the sacristy, or in the vestibule of the church. In the OF, water would be blessed at the beginning of at least one Mass each Sunday. This could be done at the principal Sunday Mass (as was the practice before the Council), a Mass which would be celebrated with extra solemnity. Alternatively, the Mass time could vary from week to week so that every few weeks those who always attend the same Mass may experience the Sunday blessing with holy water as a reminder of their Baptism. The water

---

<sup>8</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree (Urbi et Orbis) *Cum exusitato more*, Prot. N. 1745/02/L (14 September 2002), AAS 94 (2002) 684.

not used for the actual sprinkling could then be added to the large vessel holding the holy water. In connection with this practice, we would do well to catechize our people on the importance of holy water and encourage them to bring it home and use it, as has been the practice of the universal Church from ancient times.

## **Conclusion**

As water is a basic element essential to all of life, so holy water is a basic element in service to the spiritual life of God's people. Reaffirming its blessing as not merely invocative but constitutive can make a valuable contribution to reclaiming a sense of the sacred, so desperately needed at this time.

Setting aside holy water for a sacred purpose, and encouraging its use as such in the daily lives of the faithful, can quicken within them a sensitivity to the sacramental dimension of all of creation and thus form them more deeply in a truly Catholic world view. In that way they may more readily, in the words of blessing of holy water at Mass in the current edition of *the Roman Missal*, "be defended from all ills of spirit and body, and so approach [Almighty God] with hearts made clean and worthily receive [His] salvation."