

The Holy Water Font and the Sign of the Cross

Today we begin the series of liturgy lessons that were promised last week. You may recall that every Saturday Vigil and Sunday Mass will include one of these short lessons. We are presenting them so that you will have a better understanding of the most important Rite of the Church, the Mass. We hope you will find them both interesting and instructive.

Description

Standing at the door of a Catholic church one of the first things that most people notice is the altar. The altar is the central focal point of a Catholic church because it's where the most important liturgical act of the Church takes place. It's on the altar that the priest, acting in the person of Christ, re-presents the single most important act that has occurred in the world since its creation: Jesus' death on the cross as His final act of sacrifice to the Father and the beginning of a new covenant between God and man.

Entering into the church we bring ourselves with all of our experiences, all of our brokenness and all of our accomplishments. We come to worship God with our whole self: body, mind and spirit.

The Church understands that we pray with our wholes selves, our bodies and our minds. We are a sensual creatures and so we pray with all our senses: We kneel in humble adoration, we stand to show respect and focus our attention, we genuflect to give honor, and we sit attentively to listen.

We observe the beauty that surrounds us in the stained glass windows that often depict important concepts of the faith and in the beauty of the vestments of the priest and in the sacred vessels that are used; we smell the incense that symbolizes our prayers rising to God; we hear the sound of the bells calling us to attention, the prayer of the priest and deacon and of the choir; we taste the sacred Bread and Wine that is Christ who is the true food from heaven and we touch the Sacred Species as well as those around us in a sign of peace.

On entering the church we notice the holy water fonts at the entrances to the church and we dip our fingers into the water. We cross ourselves: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

We then proceed to our seat in the pew.

History

The holy water font at the entrance to churches has a long history going back to ancient Israel. Water has always been used to cleanse and purify. Water used to wash symbolizes our need to come to the Lord freed from sin and open to receiving His grace. In the Old Testament, priests would sprinkle water in a house to purify it. At the Temple in Jerusalem priests would purify themselves with water before offering sacrifice of animals to God. Today, a priest when blessing a house will use holy water. It's also an important element in both minor and major exorcisms.

In the early Church, believers would wash their hands before praying. Therefore, in many early church buildings there was often a courtyard with a fountain in it so people could wash their hands. And, water is used at baptism to wash us free from original sin.

Water is also the medium through which the blessing of the priest is transferred to the faithful. The use of Holy Water by a person with the right disposition purifies him or her from venial sin and strengthens them from the temptations from the evil one.

Around the fourth century, the holy water font began to be placed in churches not only as a medium of purification but to serve as a reminder for us of our baptism where we were freed from sin and made adopted sons and daughters of God.

How Holy Water can help us prepare for Mass

Dip your finger into the font and make the sign of the Cross saying, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." As we do this, we place ourselves humbly before the Most Holy Trinity. We call on God to have mercy on us and to help us.

The words of the Sign of the Cross and the blessed water remind us of our baptism and we recall that we are members of the Church, the family of God, and as such have a responsibility to be signs of faith, hope and love to the world. We come to Mass to be strengthened for this task.