

The Meaning of Water 1  
Fr. George Timko  
Upbeat  
v.1, n. 11, 1969

“Grant sanctification, blessing, purification  
and health unto all who are sprinkled and  
anointed with this holy water,  
and unto all who shall drink of it.”

--From the Great Blessing of Water

Water has always had a special religious meaning for Christians. Christ Himself stressed its importance: “*Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” In accordance with our Lord’s words, water is blessed during the Sacrament of Baptism, and it becomes the means of our initiation and rebirth in Christ.

#### HOLY WATER

The Role of water is also highlighted during the Festival of Epiphany, when the Church serves the rite known as “The Great Blessing of Water.” During this service, water is blessed and designated as “Holy Water.” And like the baptismal waters, this water also becomes an instrument of spiritual renewal and sanctification.

The faithful look upon this *Blessed Water* with a special attitude and belief. They acknowledge this possibility of receiving God’s blessings through its use. The faithful drink this water; they are blessed with it; their homes and other objects are sprinkled with it. And, through these ritualistic actions, they find it possible to experience the Divine Presence.

#### THE SKEPTICS

Some people are completely indifferent to this notion of *Holy Water*. They simply scoff, and with a sneer pass such remarks as “magic” or “superstition.” Others are deeply skeptical. They are not quite sure about the place of such things as Holy Water in the Christian life. They have serious reservations and doubts about the Christian validity of such things.

But aside from these extreme attitudes, most people tend to misunderstand the nature and purpose of holy water. And practically everyone asks two specific questions: What is the meaning or significance of this water? And how does it have the power to sanctify or make holy?

#### SACRAMENTAL QUALITY

The Church’s answer to the first question is that holy water is sacramental. By sacramental, we mean that God can personally work through this water and enter into relationship with us. By sacramental we mean that through this water we can receive the grace of God; that through this water we can enter into communion with God; that through this water the spiritual force of God’s power can be transmitted to us.

Too often we are inclined to limit God's grace to the category known as the "seven sacraments." We tend to forget that we can enter into communion with God through various other means. We minimize the fact that we can enter into relationship with God by the use of material and ritualistic aids. And so, we lose the sacramental significance of such religious matters as prayer, worship, the Bible, fasting and holy water.

The sacramental aspect of holy water is clearly revealed throughout the Blessing of Water Service. Especially do we find this sacramental meaning pronounced in the priest's prayer:

*"And impart to this water the grace of redemption, and the blessing of Jordan. Make it a source of immortality, a gift of sanctification, a remission of sins, a healing of infirmities, a destruction of demons....And unto all who shall partake of it, may it be unto the purification of their souls and bodies, unto the healing of their sufferings, unto the sanctification of their houses, and unto every expedient service. For Thou art our God who through water and the Spirit dost renew our nature, which has fallen into decay through sin. Thou art our God who with water did drown sin in the days of Noah..."*

#### RENEWAL THROUGH WATER

Through His Baptism, our Lord consecrated the element of water as an instrument of our redemption and reconciliation with God. Water was designated as the sacramental means of spiritual cleansing and religious commitment. The Epiphany ritual of blessing water is a memorial of water's sanctification by Christ in the Jordan. And in a way it points to the reality of our regeneration by water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism.

The Scriptures lay great stress upon this sanctifying role of water. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we find God using water as a means of purification and grace: Water is shown to manifest spiritual power and force; it is looked upon as a vehicle of Divine mercy and love; it is recognized as conveying health and life, cleansing and purity; it is known to regenerate spiritual vitality in man.

#### BY DIVINE POWER

"But surely it is superstitious to think that water can cause some spiritual effect," you say. "How can water minister spiritual purification and renewal?" The Church's answer to this second question is found in God's activity of caring for us. The effects transmitted by holy water are possible only the power of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the service, we find the supplicating prayer: *"That these waters may be sanctified by power, descent and effectual operation of the Holy Spirit...."*

Again and again, we find the plea: *"Do Thou, the same Master, now sanctify this water by the Holy Spirit."* It is by virtue of the Spirit of God that this water becomes holy. It is by Divine action that this water is consecrated as a medium of divine blessing. It is God Himself who works sanctification and healing through this water. It is by the operation of the Holy Spirit that we can be spiritually acted upon through this water. NOT MAGIC.

At this point, a word of caution is necessary. There is a great danger in misunderstanding holy water as something mechanical. There is a tendency to look upon this water as embodying a divine power in its material elements and to think that it automatically conveys holiness upon everything it touches. Some people feel that by drinking holy water, they automatically receive a holy character in the eyes of God.