

History of Holy Water

Certainly other religions use water in the same way as we do, say for baptizing, but why do we call it Holy Water?

The first real written record we have of the use of holy water in the practice of Christianity goes back to about the year 400 when the first established "Apostolic Constitutions" were being written for church practices and understandings of the faith.

In earliest Christian times, water was used for expiatory (expiation of sins) and other purificatory purposes that was in used under the Jewish Law. And if we really want to go back in time regarding the use of water as a cleansing symbol, we can consider the Great Flood in the days of Noah. Certainly the baptism of Jesus by St. John the Baptist is a well recorded use of water, but we're on the search for the use of Holy Water. The use of flowing water from the sea or a river is still not considered holy water.

We have two recent discoveries that may help us in our quest. The Pontifical of Scrapion of Thumis, a fourth-century bishop, and the "testamentum Domini", a Syriac composition dating from the fifth to the sixth century, contain a blessing of oil and water during Mass.

The formula in Scrapion's Pontifical is as follows: "We bless these creatures in the Name of Jesus Christ, Thy only Son; we invoke upon this water and this oil the Name of Him Who suffered, Who was crucified, Who arose from the dead, and Who sits at the right of the Uncreated. Grant unto these creatures the power to heal; may all fevers, every evil spirit, and all maladies be put to flight by him who either drinks these beverages or is anointed with them, and may they be a remedy in the Name of Jesus Christ, Thy only Son."

Other authentic fourth century writings mention the use of water sanctified either by the liturgical blessing just referred to, or by the individual blessing of some holy person.

St. Epiphanius records that at Tiberias a man named Joseph poured water on a madman, having first made the sign of the cross and pronounced these words over the water: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified, depart from this unhappy one, thou infernal spirit, and let him be healed!"

Joseph was converted upon seeing the results of the man being cured. Subsequently he used the same proceeding to overcome witchcraft; yet, he was neither a bishop nor a cleric.

Theodoret relates that Marcellus, Bishop of Apamea, sanctified water by the sign of the cross and that Aphraates cured one of the emperor's horses by making it drink water blessed by the sign of the cross. Mind you now that all this was taking place in what we call the Eastern Church, which would be the earliest and most influential practices of the Catholic faith. The reason is obvious, it was established by the original twelve apostles and those they ordained as ministers of the faith.

As the church spread throughout the world, as Christ himself ordered, the church preached the gospel further and further to the west. That would be into Rome and beyond, continuing its movement all the way to the Americas centuries later. (Might be helpful to view a map of the east in relationship to Rome, Italy.)

In the West, there are records of the same practices regarding making water holy. Gregory of Tours tells of a recluse named Eusitius who lived in the sixth century and possessed the power of curing quartan fever by giving its victims to drink of water that he had blessed. It is known that some of the **faithful believed that holy water possessed curative properties for certain diseases, and that this was true in a special manner of baptismal water.** In some places it was carefully preserved throughout the year and, by reason of its having been used in baptism, was considered free from all

corruption. This belief spread from East to West; and scarcely had baptism been administered, when the people would come with all sorts of vessels and take away the water, some keeping it carefully in their homes while others watered their fields, vineyards, and gardens with it. That all most sounds sacrilegious doesn't it. But keep in mind that this is how people survived and prospered. And, do we not have our homes, car and pets blessed using Holy Water even today?

So we know that water was originally used as baptismal water, but some was permanently retained at the entrance to Christian churches where a clerk sprinkled the faithful as they came in. This was act was called "hydrokometes" or "introducer by water."

Interesting reading; Acts 8:26-40 in which Phillip is inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak to the Ethiopian who just happens to be reading the writings of Isaiah whereupon Phillip explains the scripture to him and following the explanation the Ethiopian says, looks there's water, what's to prevent me from being baptized? There are so many interesting artifacts that make our Christian faith so rich and beautiful and traditionally used throughout the centuries.

The ancient letter of Synesius mentions "lustral water placed in the vestibule of the temple". Balsamon tells us that they "made" holy water at the beginning of each lunar month. It is quite possible that, according to canon 65 of the Council of Constantinople held in 691, this rite was established for the purpose of definitively supplanting the pagan feast of the new moon and causing it to pass into oblivion. In ninth century, Pope Leo IV ordered that each priest bless water every Sunday in his own church and sprinkle the people with it. The directions were as follows: "Every Sunday, before the celebration of Mass, the priest shall bless water in his church, and, for this holy purpose, he shall use a clean and suitable vessel. The people, when entering the church, are to be sprinkled with this water, and those who so desire may carry some away in clean vessels so as to sprinkle their houses, fields, vineyards, and cattle, and the provender with which these last are fed, as also to throw over their own food."

The rule of having water blessed for the aspersion at Mass on Sunday became the general practice, but the exact time set by Leo IV and Hincmar was not everywhere observed. There are two Sundays on which water is not and seems never to be blessed: these are Easter Sunday and Pentecost. The reason is because on the eve of these two feasts water for the baptismal fonts is blessed and consecrated and, before its mixture with the holy chrism, the faithful are allowed to take some of it to their homes, and keep it for use in time of need.

The Catechism has this to say about Holy Water and the sign of the cross.

1668: 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. In accordance with bishops' pastoral decisions, they can also respond to the needs, culture, and special history of the Christian people of a particular region or time. They always include a prayer, often accompanied by a specific sign, such as the laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, or the sprinkling of holy water (which recalls Baptism).

When reading this section there is a reference to 2157, so lets see what it has to say.

2157: The Christian begins his day, his prayers, and his activities with the Sign of the Cross: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." The baptized person dedicates the day to the glory of God and calls on the Savior's grace which lets him act in the Spirit as a child of the Father. The sign of the cross strengthens us in temptations and difficulties.

This helps explain why we bless ourselves with Holy Water and make the sign of the cross in the process. We'll talk more about Sacramentals and of course the sacraments later.