The Holy Water Font



Most Catholics step inside the church, dip their fingers lightly in the holy water font and make the Sign of the Cross. The gesture speaks volumes: the life of faith, commitment and devotion captured in simple movement and paired with the water and it becomes one powerful declaration of Christianity.

A Baptismal Reminder

The blessed holy water reminds us of our baptism: by receiving baptism, we were adopted into God's family, grace was poured into our souls – we became "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Baptism is administered by the pouring out of blessed water three times, in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. When we bless ourselves with holy water from the font as we enter church we are reconnecting with that mysterious and foundational experience of receiving the sacrament of baptism. "In making the Sign of the Cross with the holy water, we are mindful that we are called to renew those baptismal promises of rejecting Satan, all his works, and all his empty promises, and to profess our creedal faith."

Repentance of Sin and Protection from Evil

As we enter church and cross ourselves with holy water, we also seek to repent of sin, so that we can offer our prayers and worship to God with pure and contrite hearts. The background of ritual washing with holy water is evoked and comes, in part, from Psalm 50: "Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me." St. John the Baptist underscored this sentiment in calling people of his time to conversion. Catholic tradition has long held that holy water is a substantial force for keeping evil at bay. A proponent who wrote specifically about this in 1562 is Saint Teresa of Avila: "From long experience I have learned that there is nothing like holy water to put devils to flight and prevent them from coming back again. They also flee from the Cross, but return; so holy water must have great virtue."

Purifying the Mind and the Heart

Holy water is what the Church calls a "sacramental." The Catechism defines sacramentals like this (#1667):

> *Holy Mother Church has, moreover, instituted sacramentals. These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy.*

The "effect" that is signified by blessing ourselves with holy water is, basically, cleansing. As we enter the Church and prepare to worship God through the liturgy, we want our minds and hearts to be pure, to be purified from sin and selfishness. This gesture is a way of giving physical and material expression to this desire for repentance and purification. After all, water and cleansing go together even in the natural world. Thus, from the sacramental point of view, the connection is extended into the supernatural plain. You can also express this desire by adding a silent prayer after you make the sign of the cross: "Lord, cleanse me and purify me so that I can worship you and receive you worthily…" This purification helps us focus on God, and focus on praying and worshipping God. That intensified focus opens our souls to receive the grace God wants to send us through the sacramental liturgy.

Entering the Sacred Space

The location of holy water fonts at the entrance of our churches symbolizes the difference between ordinary space and sacred space. When we enter into the holy place, we bless ourselves with holy water. We leave behind the worldly noise and confusion that surrounds our normal, everyday activities, and we are refreshed and renewed by the order, silence, reverence, and beauty of the sacred space, the space used only for prayer and worship. It helps us make the transition from normal business into the special activity of divine worship.

When the first Christian houses of worship were built, the atrium that formed a kind of transition space between the outside, public arena and the church proper, where the liturgy was celebrated, often contained a large fountain. Worshippers would stop at the fountain and bathe their hands and feet (shoes were not as common in ancient times as they are now, at least in the warmer climates) before entering the sacred space. This was a way of preparing themselves, of switching gears, so to speak, in order to be fully attentive during the worship service. As church architecture evolved, so did the fountains. They become holy water fonts, like the ones we are used to today. When we use them with this in mind, they help us calm and quiet our minds and hearts, leaving aside the hustle and bustle of life in a secular world so that we can enter gratefully into God's presence.

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