

What You Need To Know About Holy Water

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Author Unknown

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On the Use of Holy Water

During our entire life there is a great blessing next to us – holy water. Blessed water is a **form of God’s grace: it cleanses the believers from spiritual uncleanness and sanctifies and strengthens them for the spiritual struggle of salvation in God.**

We are immersed in it for the first time at Baptism, when during this mystery we are lowered into a vessel filled with holy water. Holy water of the mystery of Baptism washes away sinful uncleanness of man; it renews and revives him into a new life in Christ. Holy water is certainly present during the blessing of churches and of all objects used in church services, during the blessing of residential homes, buildings and any everyday objects. We are sprinkled with holy water in Processions of the Cross and during moliebens.

On the day of Theophany every Orthodox Christian brings home a vessel with holy water, storing it carefully as the greatest holy relic and, with prayer, partakes of the holy water at times of illness and various infirmities. Holy water of Theophany, as the Holy Communion, is taken by the faithful only prior to eating or drinking anything that day.

“Blessed water”, wrote the luminary Dimitri Hersonsky, **“Has the power to sanctify souls and bodies of everyone who makes use of it.” Partaken with faith and prayer, it heals our bodily infirmities.** Holy water quenches the fire of passions and drives away evil spirits – this is why dwellings and all things, which are being blessed, are sprinkled with holy water.

Saint Seraphim, after (hearing) confessions of pilgrims, always gave them to drink from a cup of holy water. Venerable Ambrose sent a bottle with holy water to a terminally ill person, and the incurable illness, to the amazement of doctors, was gone. The elder heiroschemamonk Seraphim Vyritsky always gave advice to sprinkle food products with holy water from the Jordan River, which, in his words, “by itself sanctified everything.” When someone was very ill, elder Seraphim blessed him to take a tablespoon of holy water every hour. The elder used to say that there was no stronger medicine than holy water and holy oil.

The First Blessing of Water

Blessing of water was accepted by the Church from the Apostles and their successors. But the first example was given by the Lord Himself when He immersed Himself into the Jordan River and made holy the nature of water.

Water was not always in need of sanctification. There were times when everything on earth was pure and holy. *“And God saw every thing that he had made”*, says the book of Genesis, *“was very good”* (Gen.1: 31)*. At that time, before the fall of man, all was created by God’s word, all came to life through the Holy Spirit that dwelled above the water. Everything on earth bore the seal of the God’s all-sanctifying blessing, and because of this, earthly elements served for the benefit of man: they supported life and preserved the body from destruction. Living in these harmonious surroundings of paradise, man, as promised by God, was meant to be immortal, *“For God made not death”* (Wisdom of Solomon 1:13).

But man himself, through association with an unclean spirit, took into his soul the seed of uncleanness. And then the Spirit of God stepped away from the unclean creation: *“And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh”* (Gen. 6:3). Now, everything that the hands of sinners touched became unclean, everything became a weapon of sin, and therefore was deprived of God’s blessing and was subjected to damnation. The elements, that previously served man, changed. The earth now produced thorns and

wolves; the air, saturated with decay, became dangerous and sometimes lethal. Water, having turned into a runoff of sewage, became contagious, dangerous, and now in the hands of God's righteous judgment began to act as a weapon of punishment of the unrighteous.

But this does not mean that mankind has been denied holy water. The spring, brought out of a mountainside by Moses streamed, of course, not ordinary water but special water. Not ordinary was the water in the well of the Samaritan woman, which had been dug out by the forefather Jacob and later sanctified by our Savior's conversation at this source.

The idea of holy water is encountered even in the Old Testament: "*and the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel*" (Num. 5:17). But water that is altogether special runs in the Jordan River. Our Lord Jesus Christ appeared on the Jordan River in order to **sanctify the essence of water and to make it a source of blessing for the mankind**. That is why at the time of Baptism of our Lord in the Jordan River, it was as if the wonder of creation was repeated: the heavens opened up, the Spirit of God descended, and the voice of the Heavenly Father was heard: "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*" (Matt. 3:17). Thus, **blessing of water** took place for the first time after the fall of man into sin.

Why The Church Blesses Water

Why does the Church again and again bless water, if it has already been blessed by the Baptism of the Son of God Himself?

We, the fallen, even though renewed by God's grace, always, until death carry within us the seed of ancient sinful uncleanness, and for that reason we are always capable of sinning, and by this, we again and again introduce into the surrounding world uncleanness and decay. For this reason, our Lord Jesus Christ, having ascended into heavens, left with us His living and life-giving Word, granted the faithful the right to bring down to earth the blessing of the Heavenly Father through the strength of their faith and prayer, and sent down the Comforter Spirit of Truth, Who is always present in the Church of Christ, so that despite the inexhaustible seed of sin and uncleanness in the hearts of mankind, the Church would always have an inexhaustible source of sanctification and life.

In keeping this commandment of God, the Holy Church by the Word of God, by means of holy mysteries and prayers always blesses not only the man himself, but also everything that he uses in the world. By this the **Church limits the spread of the sinful uncleanness and prevents the multiplication of destructive consequences of our sins**.

The Church *blesses land*, asking God for the blessing of fertility; it *blesses bread* which serves us as food and *water* which quenches our thirst. Without blessing, without sanctification, could this mortal food and water sustain our life? "*It is not the growing of fruits that nourisheth man: but that it is Thy word, which preserveth them that put their trust in Thee*" (Wisdom of Solomon 16:26). From this emerges the answer to the question of why the Church blesses water. **By blessing water the Church returns to the element of water its original purity and holiness, and through the strength of prayer and the Word of God, brings down onto the water the Lord's blessing and the grace of the Most Holy and Life-giving Spirit.**

Why Water is Blessed in Special Vessels

Like everything else in the Church, the vessel in which the blessing of water takes place carries a great symbolic meaning.

Externally, this vessel resembles a chalice for communion. The vessel for the blessing of water is a large bowl on a low stand with a round base for placement on a table. On the eastern side of the bowl there are places where three candles are put at the start of the blessing of water, in the image of the Holy Trinity, which sanctifies and enlightens people by God's grace. As a vessel and container of God's grace, the bowl for the blessing of water approaches in its symbolic meaning the eucharistic cup – the chalice (*translated from Greek – a vessel for drinking*)-- and, like the chalice, signifies the Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, in Whose womb formed the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. The round base of the cup for the blessing of the

water symbolizes the circle of the *earthly* Church, the round cup itself, into which water is poured, symbolizes the *heavenly* Church, and both together they are *symbolic of the Mother of God*, as the most pure vessel of God's grace.

The baptismal bath possesses the same basic symbolic meaning. This vessel is also made to look like a cup, but of a significantly greater size than the vessel for the blessing of water, and on a high stand.

How the Order of the Great Sanctification of Water Takes Place

The order of the blessing of water which takes place during the feast day of Theophany is called *great* because of an especially festive ceremony, imbued with the remembrance of the Lord's Baptism, in which the Church sees not only the prototype of the mystical washing away of sins, but also the actual blessing of the nature of water itself, through the immersion into it of God in the flesh.

The Great blessing of water sometimes takes place at the end of Liturgy, after the prayer behind the ambo, and sometimes at the end of Vespers after the litany: "*Let us complete our evening prayer...*" It takes place during Liturgy on the day of Theophany, and also on the eve of Theophany when the eve falls on any day of the week besides Saturday or Sunday. If the eve of Theophany is on Saturday or Sunday then the Great Blessing of Water takes place at the end of Vespers. On the day of Theophany itself (January 19/6) the blessing of water takes place with a festive Procession of the Cross known as "procession to the Jordan".

As on the eve of Theophany, on the feast day itself, the clergy go through the Royal Doors for the blessing of water. Before the Cross is carried out, a priest or a bishop in full vestments cense only the front of the Cross three times. The Cross is carried out (by a priest) on his head accompanied by two candle bearers and deacons with censers. One of the clergymen carries the Holy Gospel. They walk in this order towards large vessels, which have been filled with water ahead of time. Here, the priest carrying the Cross takes it off his head. At the water, he blesses in the four directions with the Cross, and lays it on the covered and adorned table. The congregation lights candles; the rector, led by a deacon with a candle, censes three times near the table, the icons, the choir and the people.

The Great Blessing of Water is begun with the singing of troparia: "*The voice of the Lord crieth out over the waters, saying: Come, receive ye all the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of the fear of God, even Christ who is made manifest*", "*To-day is the nature of water sanctified*"¹ and others. Three readings from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (35:1-10; 55:1-13; 12:3-6) are read next. The great prophet of the Old Testament thrice foretold the Lord's Baptism in the Jordan River, which took place at the junction of the two Testaments. He expressed joy and hope of the Church in the drawing of water from the source of salvation: "*Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters... Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God for He will abundantly pardon*" (Isaiah 55:1, 6-7).

After this the Epistle of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 10:1-4) is read about the mystical prototypical baptism of the Judeans unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and of their spiritual food in the desert and the spiritual drink from the Rock, which is an image of the coming Christ. Finally, the Gospel of Mark (Mark 1:9-12) is read in which the Apostle tells about the actual Baptism of the Lord.

How striking, lofty and divine is the voice of the Church, with which it calls the Lord from the heavens unto our earthly waters! "*Great art Thou, O Lord, and marvelous are Thy works, and speech sufficeth not to sing the praises of Thy wonders. For Thou, by Thy will, from nothingness hast brought all things into being; by Thy majesty Thou dost uphold all creation, and by Thy providence Thou dost direct the world... All the reason-endowed powers tremble before Thee. The Sun singeth Thy praises, and the Moon glorifieth Thee; the Stars, also, stand before Thy presence. The Light obeyeth Thee. The depths shudder with awe before Thee; the water-springs do Thy bidding. Thou hast spread out the heavens like a curtain. Thou hast established the earth upon the waters. With sand hast Thou walled in the sea. Thou hast shed abroad the air for breathing. The Angelic Powers serve Thee. The Archangelic hosts adore Thee... For Thou, the God which cannot be circumscribed, who art from everlasting and ineffable... Wherefore do Thou, O King who lovest mankind, come down now also through the descent of Thy Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water.*"²

Censing over the water may take place at this time. The priest blesses the water with his hand three times at the time of reading of these words: *“Wherefore do Thou, O King who lovest mankind, come down now also through the descent of Thy Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water”*.

In addition to the immersion of the precious Cross into the water three times, the great agiasma (in Greek, “holy”, is the name given to the water, sanctified during the Great Blessing of Water) is also blessed by the sign of the Cross, and by more powerful and more complex prayers and hymns, than during the Lesser Blessing of Water, which is done during moliebens.

*“Wherefore do Thou, O King who lovest mankind, come down now also through the descent of Thy Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water. And impart unto it the grace of redemption, the blessing of Jordan. Make it a fountain of immortality, a gift of sanctification, a remission of sins, a healing of infirmities, a destruction of demons; unapproachable by hostile powers, filled with angelic might.”*³ Here it is being requested that water be filled with angelic might, and if this is being requested then, with faith, the acquisition of such mystical power by the water is possible – and will occur...

*“...Filled with angelic might. And may it be unto all those who shall draw it, and shall partake of it unto the purification of their souls and bodies, unto the healing of their passions, unto the sanctification of their houses, and unto every expedient service... Do Thou, the same Master, sanctify now also this water by thy Holy Spirit. Grant also unto all who shall be sprinkled therewith, and shall partake thereof, and shall anoint themselves therewith, sanctification, blessing, purification and bodily health,”*⁴ the priest prays with these powerful and commanding words. But before this, a deacon raises almost the same supplications:

“That these waters may be sanctified by the power, and effectual operation, and descent of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord.

That there may descend upon these waters the cleansing operation of the super-substantial Trinity...

That he will endue them with the grace of redemption, the blessing of Jordan, the might, and operation, and descent of the Holy Spirit...

That the Lord our God will send down the blessing of Jordan and sanctify these waters...

That this water may be unto the bestowing of sanctification; unto the remission of sins; unto the healing of soul and body: and unto every expedient service...

That this water may be a fountain welling forth unto life eternal...

That it may manifest itself effectual unto the averting of every machination of our foes, whether visible or invisible...

For those who shall draw of it and take it unto the sanctification of their homes...

That it may be for the purification of the souls and bodies of all those who, with faith, shall draw and partake of it...

*That he will graciously enable us to perfect sanctification by participation in these waters, through the invisible manifestation of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord.”*⁵

After reading all prayers, the priest immerses the precious Cross into the water thrice, holding it upright with both hands while singing the troparion of Theophany: *“When Thou wast baptized in the Jordan, O Lord, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest; for the voice of the Father bare witness to Thee, calling Thee His beloved Son. And the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the certainty of the word. O Christ our God, Who hast appeared and hast enlightened the world, glory be to Thee.”*⁶ The priest takes the vessel with holy water and the aspergillum and sprinkles in all directions in the form of a cross. After this, the people come up to kiss the Cross and the priest sprinkles each person with holy water.

St. John Chrisostom has said that the water of Theophany remains unspoiled for many years, being fresh, pure and pleasing, as if it has been drawn from a living spring at this moment. This is the miracle of God’s grace, which even now everyone can see!

According to Church belief, agiasma is not merely water of spiritual significance, but a new being, a spiritual-corporeal being, an intertwining of heaven and earth, of grace and matter, and a close one at that. This is why the **Great agiasma according to church canons is viewed as a kind of a lower degree of Holy Communion: in those cases, when a penance and a prohibition against approaching (to receive) the Holy Body and Blood is imposed on a member of the Church due to committed sins, there is a provision, usual to canons: “He may drink agiasma only”**.

Many mistakenly think that water, blessed on the eve of Theophany and water, blessed on the day of

Theophany are different, but in actuality, the same order of the Great Blessing of Water is used both, on the eve and on the day of Theophany. The water of Theophany is a holy relic that should be found in the home of every Orthodox Christian. It is carefully kept in the holy corner next to icons.

How Water is Blessed During Moliebens Requested by the Faithful

Besides the water of Theophany, the Orthodox Christians often use water that was blessed during moliebens. Molieben singing or molieben prayer service is a special service at which we ask the Lord, the Mother of God and the saints to send us mercy, or thank God for the good things we receive. Moliebens are served in church or in private homes.

In church, moliebens are served after Liturgy and when needed and requested by the faithful. To these moliebens belong prayers for the blessing of various objects, for the healing of the sick, for travelers on a long journey, for the soldiers, etc. The order of the lesser blessing of water usually takes place during moliebens.

Lesser blessing of water is also conducted by the Church on the day of Procession of the Life-giving Cross and on the day of Mid-Pentecost, when the words of the Savior, full of the deepest mystery, spoken by Him to the Samaritan woman are remembered: *“whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life”* (John 4:14).

For the lesser blessing of water, a covered table is placed in the middle of the church, onto which a vessel with water is placed as well as a Cross and the Gospel. Candles are lit in front of the vessel. After the priest’s exclamation, the 142nd psalm is read: *“O Lord, hear my prayer...”*, then *“God is the Lord...”* and the troparia are sung: *“Unto the Birth-giver of God let us sinners and humble ones now diligently have recourse...”*, *“Never, O Birth-giver of God, will we unworthy ones cease to proclaim thy powers...”*⁷ At this time the priest censes the water in the shape of the cross. After the reading of the 50th psalm *“Have mercy on me, O God...”*, the troparia and a litany, a censuring of the church or home takes place.

Next, a prokiemen is sung and the Epistle is read, in which St. Paul speaks about Christ: *“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily He took not on him the nature of angels; but He took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted”* (Hebrews 2:14-18).

After that the Gospel is read: *“Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had”* (John 5:2-4).

A litany is intoned: *“In peace let us pray to the Lord”*, in which supplications are raised for the sanctification of water. Usually, at this time the water is being censed. Next, the priest reads the prayer of the blessing of the water.

Sometimes a special prayer is read: *“O God, whose name is great, who works countless wonders, come today, O Master, to Thy servants who pray to Thee, and send Thy Holy Spirit and sanctify this water, and to Thy servants, who drink it, and partake of it, and are sprinkled with it, grant the transformation of passions, the remission of sins, healing of illnesses, release from all evil, support and blessing of homes, cleansing of all uncleanness and driving away the tricks of the devil. For blessed and glorified is Thy most precious and magnificent Name, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.”*

After the reading of the prayers, the priest, having taken the precious Cross, with the Crucifixion facing him, makes a motion in the shape of the cross on the surface of the water with the lower part of the Cross, then submerges the entire Cross into the water. At this time the troparia are sung: *“O Lord, save Thy people...”*

(thrice) and “*Make us worthy of Thy gifts...*”⁸ After that, the priest kisses the Cross removed from the water and sprinkles everyone present and the entire church. Those who are present venerate the cross, and the priest sprinkles each person. After the blessing of water, everyone who has requested the molieben may receive holy water.

Why the Church Prays for Springs of Water

“The principal things for the whole use of man’s life are water, fire, iron, and salt, flour of wheat, honey, milk, and the blood of the grape, and oil, and clothing. All these things are for good to the godly: so to the sinners they are turned into evil” (Ecclesiasticus 39:32-33).

“... What gift is as necessary for us as water?”, says the hieromartyr Hippolytus of Rome. *“Everything is washed by water, and nourished, and cleansed and irrigated. Water moistens the earth, produces dew, enlarges grapes, leads the grain to ripeness... What more is there to say? Without water nothing visible to us can exist; water is so necessary that while other elements have their dwelling under heavens, it [water] obtained for itself a place above the heavens. The Prophet himself testifies to this, crying out: “Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and thou water that art above heavens” (Psalms 148:4).*

The Church, with an ardent prayer, appeals to the Lord to summon *water, sweet and plentiful*, from the depths of the earth. Well water is not ordinary, for “the digging of a well” is accomplished with special prayers of a priest and sanctified with a special ceremony. *“Grant unto us water in this place -- sweet and tasty, sufficient, therefore, for our needs, and safe for consumption...”*⁹, thus prays the priest, who is the first to start digging the well.

A special prayer is said again over a well that has been dug: *“O Creator and Fashioner of all things...send down Thy heavenly blessing on this water in this well, and by Thy divine, powerful and mighty right arm banish from it every contrary action and activity of the devil... And unto all that shall take and drink of it, and shall wash with it, grant that it be for health and for the transformation of every suffering and infirmity, and for the healing of every sickness...”*¹⁰

Ordinary well water becomes an object of devotion and a wonderworking object at that, **“water for the health and transformation”**. A multitude of springs, wells and sources are known, where through the prayers of saints, flows water possessing *greater blessing than the waters of Bethesda of Jerusalem*. Not only drinking this water, but also even immersion into water of these sources brings a multitude of healings and miracles.

The Church has always conducted and today conducts blessing of water of public springs, rivers and lakes. This water flows into reservoirs and then into the water pipes of our apartments. It may be affirmed that there is not a single stream of water in the world, that has not been sanctified, spiritually fertilized by prayer, made beneficial, and consequently, that is not life-giving and saving to people, animals, birds and earth itself.

If we always acted as the Church and the Word of God taught us, then these beneficial gifts of the Holy Spirit would always be poured out on us, then *every source* (of water) would be a source of healing of infirmities of the body and soul, every cup of water would serve for cleansing, and enlightenment, *“water for the health and transformation”*, **holy water**. But this does not occur. One becomes sick from water; water becomes a dangerous, lethal and destructive element. What of tap water—even holy water does not help us!

Are the prayers of the Church powerless? When God intended to punish the world with water, He said to Noah: *“The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth... And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die” (Gen. 6:13,17).* These words can be applied to our times. One should not be surprised that water does not heal and does not bring benefit. What is so surprising, when the highest Mystery, the Eucharist – the Body and Blood of our Lord – serves many not for salvation, but for condemnation... *“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor. 11:29).*

Miracles and healings do occur in our days, but only to those who are deserving of the wonderworking action of holy water, who receive it with living faith in God’s promise and in the power of prayer of the Holy Church, to those who have a pure and sincere desire for change of their lives, for repentance and salvation. God does not work miracles where they only want to be seen out of curiosity, without sincere intention to utilize them for salvation. *“A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given*

unto it... ” (Mat. 16:4), says the Savior about His unbelieving contemporaries.

In order for holy water to bring benefit, let us take care of the purity of our souls, of the light in our thoughts and deeds. And let us lift up this prayer in our minds and in our hearts every time we come in contact with holy water.

Prayer Before Partaking of Prosphora and Holy Water

O Lord, my God, may Thy holy gift and Thy holy water be for the remission of my sins, for the enlightenment of my mind, for the strengthening of my soul and body, for the health of my soul and body, for conquering of my passions and infirmities, according to Thy mercy that hath no limit, through the prayers of Thy Most Pure Mother and all Thy saints. Amen.

Translation References:

* Biblical quotes are from the King James Version.

1. Hapgood IF, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, Englewood, NJ, 1996, p.189.
2. Ibid, p. 194.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, p. 195.
5. Ibid, pp. 192-193.
6. *Prayer Book*, 4th ed., revised, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, NY, 1996, p. 161.
7. Hapgood IF, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, Englewood, NJ, 1996, p. 470.
8. *The Great Book of Needs*, Vol. I, St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, 1999, p. 299.
9. *The Great Book of Needs*, Vol. IV, St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, 1999, p. 369.
10. Ibid, p. 372.