

HOLY WATER

Holy water is a sacramental that reminds us of baptism and disposes us to receive grace (CCC 1668). Making the sign of the cross with holy water renews our baptismal promises and asks for God's blessing.

Why Do Catholics Use Holy Water?

The holy water reminds us of our baptism and our union with Christ.

When you walk into the church, you dip your fingers into the holy water font and then make the sign of the cross. But why do you do that? Why do Catholics use holy water in their worship and their devotional life?

Consider the Lord's direction to Moses in Numbers 5:17: "And the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel; and of the dust that is in the floor of the Tabernacle the priest shall take, and put it into the water."

The Catholic Church teaches that Christ instituted seven "sacraments" — means by which grace is conferred. But beyond that, the Church recognizes other aids to devotion, such as medals, rosaries, scapulars and statues, all of which they call "sacramentals." Actions (such as the sign of the cross) can be sacramentals, as well. Holy water, like those other aids to piety, is a "sacramental."

When you dip your finger into the holy water font at the entrance to the church and make the sign of the cross, you are touching your forehead (your mind), your shoulders and your heart with a sacramental. If this simple action is performed in faith, it imparts grace to the believer.

Water in the Scriptures

In the Scriptures, Israelite priests used to purify people and places by sprinkling them with water (see Leviticus 14:49-52 and Numbers 19-18). Likewise, in Numbers 5 (written above), God calls on his people to use holy water in a blessing.

Israelite priests used water ritually, to wash their hands before and after offering sacrifices. And the great Temple in Jerusalem had fountains at the entrances, in which worshippers could cleanse themselves before entering.

Water in the Liturgy

In the Mass, the priest washes his hands at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, as he prepares to offer the bread and wine which will be consecrated and will become the Body and Blood of Christ.

At Easter Vigil and during the Easter season, baptismal water or holy water may be used in replacement of the Penitential Rite.

Water in Baptism

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus instructed his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

In the sacrament of Baptism, holy water is the material substance used by God to effect the remission of sins.

Where Does Holy Water Come From?

Plain water is made holy when it is blessed by a priest. At the Easter Vigil, water is blessed for the baptism of those being received into the Church that night. In the past, this holy water was retained for use throughout the liturgical year. Now, the custom is to use fresh water for baptisms outside of the Easter season.

Once it is blessed, the holy water is reserved in a receptacle that is accessible to worshippers. Most churches have small fonts at the entrance to the church; some churches now have large baptismal fonts that sit in the vestibule or at the entrance to the church. The faithful, upon entering the church, dip their fingers into the font and make the sign of the cross, as a preparation for the liturgy.

The holy water reminds us of our baptism and our union with Christ. The imagery of “washing” helps us to remember that we need to be cleansed and forgiven for our sins.

Practicum of Holy Water

Saint Paul parish reserves the holy water for usage in the Church. Once a year, beginning of the new liturgical year, family may receive holy water and gather the family to bless their house. Those who move into new house may request the priest to come and bless the house and the family.

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