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Life-Giving Water: Holy Water

The custom of using holy water is a sacramental sign that reminds us of our Baptism and helps sanctify daily life. Making the sign of the cross with it at the end of the day or when entering a church is an expression of our desire for purification and spiritual protection, trusting in God's grace.

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It was an ordinary day at Villa Tevere, sometime in the mid-1950s. One of those days when the unexpected shows up like an old friend whose visits no longer catch you off guard. The construction of the house had gone on for several years, and difficulties arose almost daily. Don Álvaro experienced this firsthand: the lack of financial resources, delays in material deliveries, bureaucratic hurdles, and a long list of other complications that they simply had to get used to.

Almost always, after working and praying, a solution would appear; a crack of light halfway through the tunnel. But no one expected the solution that day to come in the form of... water! A spring had been found on the property. And once again, it was thanks to Don Álvaro. It meant they could dig a small well and thus speed up many processes. Everyone was astonished. They knew Don

Álvaro's command of Latin and law, and they never doubted his great talent for administration and leadership. But no one saw this coming... He had the instincts of a water diviner!^[1]

It wasn't the only time Don Álvaro helped locate an underground water source. Years later, something similar happened in Cavabianca. The ability to find water underground has always been a highly prized talent throughout history. It's a crucial discovery, since water is essential for life. Its absence brings about total dryness, while its abundance makes the land flourish. That's why the great civilizations of antiquity were always born along rivers, lakes, or seas. In the liturgy and in the history of salvation, too, water plays a vital role.

A spring of eternal life

During the blessing of water, the priest recites words that help us enter into the rich symbolism of this element and better understand the Christian custom of using holy water: “The blessing of this water reminds us of Christ, the living water, and of the sacrament of Baptism, in which we were born of water and the Holy Spirit. Whenever, therefore, we are sprinkled with this holy water or use it in blessing ourselves upon entering the church or at home, we thank God for his priceless gift to us and we ask for his help to keep us faithful to the sacrament we have received in faith.”^[2]

This image runs through the whole history of salvation, as we recall during the blessing of the baptismal water at the Easter Vigil. Pope Francis once said, “the prayer for the blessing of baptismal water reveals to us that God created water precisely with Baptism in mind. This

means that when God created water, he was thinking of the Baptism of each one of us, and this same thought accompanied him all throughout his acting in the history of salvation every time that, with precise intention, he used water for his saving work. It is as if after having created water in the first place, he had wanted to perfect it by making it eventually to be the water of Baptism.”^[3] —

This is why the prayer mentions its major biblical prefigurations: in the beginning, the Spirit hovered over the waters and planted the seed of life (cf. *Gen* 1:1–2); the waters of the flood marked the end of sin and the beginning of new life (cf. *Gen* 7:6–8:22); and the waters of the Red Sea brought freedom to the children of Abraham, delivering them from slavery in Egypt (cf. *Ex* 14:15–31).

Years after the people's liberation, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision in which water again took centre stage. He saw a spring flowing from the new Temple that became a great river, bringing life wherever it went (cf. *Ez* 47:1). In a land where drought and water scarcity were part of daily life, this vision was a powerful source of hope. From the earliest days, the Church saw in Christ the fulfillment of this vision. He is the true Temple of God. He is the source of living water.

And that water flows, along with blood, from Jesus' open side (cf. *Jn* 19:34). From ancient times, the Church has seen this moment as a symbol of Baptism and the Eucharist, flowing from the pierced heart of Christ. Various early Christian authors connected this moment to the prophet Ezekiel's vision: from his open side bursts forth the great river that, through Baptism, brings

fruitfulness and renewal to the world.

But Jesus prophesied something even greater. He said: *Whoever believes in me... out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water (Jn 7:38)*. In Baptism, the Lord has made us into springs of living water. Like water diviners, we too have the opportunity to rediscover the grace we received at Baptism each day.

Our second birthday

When we are sprinkled with holy water – whether in liturgical celebrations, especially during the Easter season, or when we sign ourselves with it upon entering a church or before going to bed – we are reminded of the most precious gift we have received: that we are children of God through Baptism. As Pope Francis reminds us, “returning to the wellspring of Christian life leads us to better understand the gift

received on the day of our Baptism and to renew our commitment to conform to it in the condition in which we find ourselves today. To renew our commitment, to better understand this gift which is Baptism, and to remember the day of our Baptism. (...) I know that some of you know it, others do not; those who do not know it, ask your family members, ask those people, godfathers, godmothers...: ‘What is the date of my Baptism?’ Because Baptism is a rebirth and it is as if it were a second birthday.”^[4] —

Through the water of baptism, we enter the great family of God’s children. And it is also through Baptism that we recognise ourselves as apostles, sent to bring the Christian life to all nations in the name of the Trinity (cf. *Mt 28:19*), called to be a source of living water for those around us.

The custom of using holy water finds its place within this baptismal context. It helps us recall important moments in the history of salvation, as well as in our own personal story. But more than that, it is a *sacramental*: a sacred sign which, in a manner that imitates the sacraments, expresses spiritual effects obtained through the Church's intercession.^[5] This means that Christians benefit from the spiritual goods that the Church holds as a treasure entrusted to her by God for the good of all. Although holy water does not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit, since it is not a sacrament, it prepares the soul to receive that grace.

When we sign ourselves with it, we become newly aware of the water we already carry within us through Baptism (the life of grace) which is inexhaustible, since it flows from the risen Christ, who gives us the Holy

Spirit. This water helps bring life to our day: it can give us the strength to begin a task, renew our energy when we are tired, bring divine consolation in moments of difficulty, and freshness to our lives. If natural water has this kind of effect, how much more can holy water, a help for the pilgrim soul, do for us?

In fact, as Saint Thomas Aquinas explained, holy water helps prepare the soul for the sacraments by removing obstacles, similar to baptismal water. It is also directed against the snares of the devil and against sin. He wrote that “holy water is effective against the external assaults of the devil.”^[6] And it is such a powerful weapon that, whenever there is repentance, it can even bring forgiveness of venial sins.

Who we belong to

We already find a reference to the use of holy water in the history of

Opus Dei as early as January 1938, in a circular letter written by Saint Josemaría. In the letter, he lists various customs already being lived by the members of Opus Dei, most of them devotions already generally practiced by other Christian faithful. He mentions holy water for the first time in that list.

Around the same time, Saint Josemaría wrote a recommendation that would later be published in *The Way*: “You ask me why I always recommend, with such insistence, the daily use of holy water. I could give you many reasons. But none better than that of the Saint of Avila: ‘From nothing do evil spirits flee more, never to return, than from holy water.’”^[7]

The saint’s quote comes from her *Book of Her Life*, in which she recounts how one day the devil appeared, placing himself on the

book she was reading. Teresa made the sign of the cross, and the devil left. But as soon as she looked back at the book, he returned. This happened three times, until she thought to sprinkle him with holy water. Only then could she go on reading. Later she would write of that experience: “I have found by experience that there is nothing the devils flee from more, never to return. They also flee from the cross, but they return.”^[8] —

Saint Josemaría, drawing on this long Christian tradition, understood the spiritual benefit that can come from using holy water. Years later, he wrote in *De Spiritu*: “Let everyone keep holy water in their room, with which they sprinkle the bed before going to sleep, and with which they sign themselves with the sign of the Cross.”

This is a very widespread tradition among Christians, and one that Pope Francis has also encouraged:

“Making the sign of the Cross when we wake, before meals, in facing danger, to protect against evil, in the evening before we sleep, means telling ourselves and others whom we belong to, whom we want to be. This is why it is so important to teach children how to make the sign of the Cross properly. And as we do upon entering a church, we can also do so at home, by keeping a bit of holy water in a suitable little vase — some families do so: this way, each time we come in or go out, by making the sign of the Cross with that water we remember that we are baptized.”^[9] —

We often use holy water at the very end of the day. Saint Josemaría had this custom: “He placed his crucifix in the pocket of his pajamas, to be able to kiss it during the night, and he sprinkled his bed with holy water.

He mentally reviewed the day, with great sorrow for his failings, and summed up with the words *pauper servus et humilis*. Then, focusing his attention on the Communion that he would be receiving on the next day, he gave himself up to the Lord with a short and simple prayer, such as ‘Jesus, I abandon myself to you, I trust in you, I rest in you,’ and soon fell asleep.”^[10] —

^[1] Cf. J. Medina Bayo, *Un Hombre Fiel (A Faithful Man)*, pg. 323 (our translation).

^[2] Blessing of Holy Water Outside of Mass, from the Catholic News Agency.

^[3] Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi*, no. 13.

^[4] Pope Francis, General Audience, 18 April 2018.

^[5] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 60.

^[6] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, 71, 2 ad 3.

^[7] *The Way*, no. 572.

^[8] Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life*, 31, 4. “Keep holy water near you, for there is nothing the devils flee from more” (*Letter 179*, 13; *ibid.*, p. 1084).

^[9] Pope Francis, General Audience, 18 April 2018.

^[10] A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III.

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