DIVINE WORSHIP REVIEW AFRICA

# NEWSLETTER

DIVINE WORSHIP REVIEW AFRICA

August 2024 Volume 1 No. 2



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## Blessing and Sprinkling of Holy Water in Catholic Liturgy:

## "SPRINKLE ME WITH HYSSOP, AND I WILL BE CLEAN" Ps 51:7

Holy water is an integral part of Catholic liturgical life, it is no wonder that a good number of Catholics welcome it with great sense of delight and satisfaction whenever a drop of it falls upon them. The term "holy water" is often taken for granted, since many Catholics have known it from their childhood and have come to accept it throughout their lives. Regrettably, we tend to forget that not every member of the Church was raised Catholic. For this reason, some who came from a different religious background seem to consider the very rite of blessing and sprinkling holy water as an idolatry and persist that holy water is an invention of the Church without knowing that there are biblical references attesting to its reality and effects (cf. Gen. 1:2, Num. 5:17; 19:11–12).

Holy water emerged originally from the Sacrament of Baptism to remind us importantly of this sacrament that

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made us a new creation and part of the body of Christ. It is made up of two elements: Water and Salt. The water symbolizes life, purification and liberation (cf. Num. 19.1–22; Ex. 30.18–20; 1 Kgs. 7.23; 2 Chr. 4.6; Lev. 6.20; 11.28, 32, 40; 13.6; 14.8, 9, 47; 15.5–11, 13, 21–22). According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the symbolism of water signifies the Holy Spirit's action in Baptism, since after the invocation of the Holy Spirit, it becomes the efficacious sacramental sign of new birth: just as the gestation of our first birth took place in water, so the water of Baptism truly signifies that our birth into the divine life is given to us in the Holy Spirit. As by one Spirit we were all baptized, so we are also made to drink of one Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). Thus, the Spirit is also personally the living water welling up from Christ crucified (cf. Jn. 19:34; 1 Jn. 5:8) as its source and welling up in us to eternal life" (cf. Jn. 4:10–14; 7:38; Ex. 17:1–6; Isa. 55:1; Zech. 14: 8; 1 Cor. 10:4; Rev. 21:6; 22:17)" (CCC 694).

The salt, on the other hand, is a symbol of taste, protection, hospitality, friendship, healing and spiritual incorruptibility (cf. Num. 18:19; Ex. 23:25–26; 2 Kgs. 2:20–21; 2 Chr. 13:5, Lev. 2:13; Ezk.16:4,43:24; Mk.9:50; Matt. 5:13; Lk. 14:34; Col. 3:8; 4:6; Eph. 4:29). Throughout history, salt is used metaphorically to signify faithfulness, permanence and purification. In ancient Israel, salt was harvested by pouring sea water into pits and allowing the water to evaporate until only salt was left. At that time, it was expensive and appropriate to offer salt to God as an act of "covenant" (Gen. 31:54; Lev. 2: 13; II Chron. 13:5; Num. 18:19; Ezek. 43:24). It was also an essential commodity used in preservation, trading and payment of soldiers in the ancient Roman Empire. It was from the latter that we got the word "salary" (salarium), derived from the Latin word "sal" meaning salt. Consequently, salt was considered as a kind of money with which the soldiers were rewarded for their daily services.

In the case of Holy water, as it was noted in the sixth century Gelasian Sacramentary, both salt and water are traditionally exorcised and then blessed before they are mixed together. A special prayer is said over the water and salt to make a combination of both categories. According to tradition, the blessing of Holy water was attributed to Pope St. Alexander I in the early second Century. It was through the liturgical blessing by the priest or deacon that the water and the salt acquire the character of a sacramental, that is, a sacred sign which bears a resemblance to the sacraments (cf. CCC 1667; SC 60). The difference between the seven sacraments and the sacramental is that Christ gave us the sacraments directly whereas the sacramentals were indirectly given by Christ through the Church for the edification of the faithful.

The rite for the blessing and sprinkling of water is clearly stated in the Appendix II of the present "Roman Missal". According to the rubrics, the rite may take place from time to time in all churches and chapels, on Sundays, especially in Easter Time, even in Masses anticipated on Saturday evenings, as a memorial of Baptism. If the rite is celebrated during Mass, it takes the place of the usual Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass.

As stipulated in the rubrics, the priest may bless the salt where the circumstances of the place or the custom of the people suggest that the mixing of salt be preserved in the blessing of the water (no.3). The salt is incorporated into the ritual to remove impurities, quench the fire of inordinate passions, and repulse the attack of the enemy. The addition of salt is a reminiscent of Elisha's miracle, who by God's command took salt and cast it into the unwholesome waters of Jericho to make them good (II Kings 2:19–22).

The rite of blessing and sprinkling of water in the present "Roman Missal" is slightly different from the one in the "Book of Blessings". The rite as contained in the Book of Blessings may be used by a priest or deacon when the blessing of water takes place outside of the Mass (cf. BOB 1390). Even though the rite of blessing and the addition of salt is not mentioned in the rite contained in the Book of Blessings but the priest or deacon can use it if

circumstances suggest.

The Sacramental of holy water is used in baptism, exorcism, in the intermingling with palm ashes, at certain Masses throughout the liturgical year, visitation of the sick, blessing of persons and objects, on entering or leaving the Church, at each compline prayer in certain liturgical rites, funeral rites and so on. It has the same power and value when blessed, so there is no difference between a holy water blessed by Father AA and Father BB. There is no difference whether he is a diocesan or a religious priest. But, there is a difference between a holy water blessed by a Catholic priest and one by a lay person. The first is the distinction between constitutive and invocative blessings and the second is the question of authority.

The power to bless holy water is given only to the ordained minister – priest and deacon (cf. BOB 1390). The efficacy of the holy water does not come from the cleric, but by means of the Church's prayer of blessing – a power flowing from Christ himself (cf. Matt. 16:19; 18:1). As a matter of fact, "it is impossible to appropriate to oneself spiritual goods and behave toward them as their owner or master, for they have their source in God. One can receive them only from Him, without payment" (CCC 2121). A person who sells or purchases holy water commits the sin of simony.

Any water blessed and recognized by the Church should be treated with every respect. There is no definite Church teaching on the practice of mixing of holy water with ordinary water to increase the quantity. It is most preferable, notwithstanding, to approach a priest to bless the elements for you. We are therefore advised not to divorce the sacramentals from the sacraments, nor the holy water from baptism, because they are focal points directing one's faith toward Christ. The Church encourages us to use holy water because it can yield many graces and blessings in our lives. Its usage serves as a reminder of our baptismal vows.



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**Questions 1:**

Should instruments accompany the priest while singing the Eucharistic Prayers?

**Answer:** "The nature of the 'presidential' parts requires that they be spoken in a loud and clear voice and that everyone listen to them attentively. Therefore, while the Priest is pronouncing them, there should be no other prayers or singing, and the organ or other musical instruments should be silent [General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) 32].

**Questions 2:**

When should the "Lamb of God" be in toned during the Holy Mass?

**Answer:** "The supplication *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) is usually sung by the choir or cantor with the congregation replying; or at least recited aloud. This

invocation accompanies the fraction of the bread and, for this reason, may be repeated as many times as necessary until the rite has been completed. The final time it concludes with the words grant us peace" (GIRM 83).

**Questions 3:**

Is it proper to place the crucifix on the altar during the Eucharistic Celebration?

**Answer:** According to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, "there is to be a cross with a figure of Christ crucified ON or CLOSE to the altar" (GIRM 117). "The cross adorned with a figure of Christ crucified and perhaps carried in procession may be placed next to the altar to serve as the altar cross, in which case it ought to be the only cross used; otherwise it is put away in a dignified place. In addition, the candlesticks are placed on the altar or near it" (GIRM 122). "Upon reaching the altar, the acolyte places the cross upright near the altar so that it may serve as the altar cross; otherwise, he puts it in a worthy place" (GIRM 188).

**Images A: Aspersorium and Aspergillum**



**Images B: Hyssop Branches**



**Difference between Aspersorium and Aspergillum:**
Aspergillum is a liturgical object used to sprinkle holy water onto people or objects. It comes in three forms: a perforated metal ball with a handle, a brush-like bundle that is dipped in the holy water, and a freshly cut branch of hyssop (sacred herb), which David mentioned in the Bible when he prayed: "Sprinkle me with hyssop, and I will be clean" (Psalms 51:7); whereas the vessel containing the holy water is known as Aspersorium.

## ABOUT DIVINE WORSHIP REVIEW AFRICA

Divine Worship Review Africa is a Catholic newsletter organized by an Association of Liturgical Scholars from different parts of Africa towards promoting authentic liturgical practices, consciousness and education among our people.

Our efforts are focused on providing resources such as articles clarifying liturgical abuses and facilitating discussions that illuminate the rich tapestry of our liturgical heritage. By doing so, we seek to empower our fellow priests, religious and lay faithful to discover and appreciate the beauty and solemnity of liturgical worship.

In a world where the sacred often finds itself overshadowed by the secular, Divine Worship Review Africa stands out as a beacon of hope, guiding the faithful towards a more profound and meaningful worship experience.

Through comprehensive liturgical education and the promotion of liturgical consciousness, we aim to nurture a worshipping community deeply aware of the significance and transformative power of the Sacred Liturgy.

We believe that a well-informed and liturgically conscious assembly is better prepared to preserve and celebrate the sacred mysteries with great devotion and marvelous fidelity. We therefore invite you to join us in this noble cause. Your support, contribution and prayers are invaluable treasures to the success of this apostolate.

*Forward your articles, responses, posts, letters and questions on issues affecting liturgical worship in Africa to this address: liturgicalconversation@gmail.com.*