

Tridentine Community News

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Water and Salt in the Sacred Liturgy

Have you ever given any thought as to how Holy Mother Church makes use of water? This most abundant substance on Earth plays several important roles, both inside and out of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Many uses of water are also accompanied by blessed salt. In ancient times, salt used to be a precious commodity. Consider the expressions “worth his salt” and “earning a salary”. Historically, the addition of salt to water constituted an offering to God of something of value. Salt has also been known to be a decontaminant, purifying the water to make it a more perfect offering.

Some applications of water require that the water be blessed before it is used. Most obvious is Holy Water, one of the best-known sacramentals. Blessing ourselves with Holy Water upon entering or exiting a church is a sign of devotion meant to focus our minds on the sacred actions that take place within. It is another manner of veiling the sacred, as an earlier column discussed. Unless the water is blessed first, what is poured into the stoups (fonts) at the entrances of a church lacks a purifying dimension.

To be considered Holy Water, water must be blessed according to one of two formulas. According to the Novus Ordo custom, the priest may simply say a prayer over the water. According to the Tridentine custom, salt is added, and the priest also says prayers of exorcism before the blessing of both salt and the water. Once exorcized and blessed, a container of blessed salt may be used again without having to be re-exorcized or blessed. The salt is mixed with the water during the blessing of the water. Note that this is a custom, and not a formal rite, thus Holy Water not blessed according to the Tridentine ritual still retains its full sacramental value.

Holy Water held in a large container in the vestibule of the church is intended to be taken home by the faithful.

Baptismal Water

The sacrament of Baptism is the simplest of all of the sacraments: All that is necessary for validity is that the person administering the sacrament pour water over the forehead of the person being baptized, and say “I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” In cases of necessity, a layperson, even a non-Catholic, can administer this sacrament validly, as long as the person has the intention to baptize. To allow for cases of emergency, the water used for this purpose does not have to be blessed, although it is preferable that part of the ceremony include blessing of the water. Recall that St. John the Baptist was able to perform his baptisms with plain water from the Jordan River.

Asperges Water

Before a solemn Tridentine Missa Cantata, it is customary to have an Asperges ceremony, during which the priest walks up and down the aisle of the church, sprinkling the faithful with water. According to Tridentine rubrics, the water in the *aspersorium* (bucket) and *aspergillum* (sprinkler) is exorcized and blessed before Mass, with the same formula used for Holy Water.

An Aspersorium typically is not emptied after being used in an Asperges ceremony, as its blessed water can be used subsequently for other purposes.

Note that in the Novus Ordo, the Asperges ceremony is one of the Penitential Rite options. It is therefore part of the Mass, and not a preceding ceremony. The blessing of the water is incorporated into this ceremony, thus the water is not blessed beforehand. No salt is used.

Water Used During Mass

At the Offertory, the priest pours wine and a smidgen of water into the chalice. This is plain water, but in the Tridentine Mass, the priest blesses the cruet of water before pouring it.

A little later, an altar server pours water over the priest’s hands while the priest recites the *Lavabo* prayer. This prayer had historic origins of actually cleansing the priest’s hands of potential poisons. Today, it serves as a symbolic purifying of the priest before he performs the most sacred of ceremonies, the consecration.

After Holy Communion, the chalice is purified, first by wine alone, and then by wine and water. In the Novus Ordo, only water is used, only one time.

Water Used to Bless Objects

Occasionally, you will see a priest use an Aspersorium to bless an object with Holy Water. For example, wedding rings and Brown Scapulars are traditionally blessed in this manner. This water, like Holy Water, has been blessed beforehand.

Disposing of Blessed Water

Many churches have a special sink in their sacristies known as a *sacrarium*. Unlike a regular sink, this sink drains directly into the soil. Its purpose is to provide a means to dispose of blessed water and wine, and in extreme circumstances, surplus consecrated wine. At churches which have do not have a sacrarium, one is supposed to dispose of blessed water and wine by pouring the remains directly into the soil.

There is an intellectual continuity in treating blessed objects with respect. If we go out of our way to have something blessed, when we are done with it, we should not send it into the sewer system or treat it as though it were merely another piece of trash.

