

BLESSED WATER

— Some General Information —

—Part One —

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

The use of consecrated water for the purpose of blessing, healing, purifying and driving away evil from the people of God has a long history.

In the Book of Numbers, we are told that God commanded Moses and Aaron to take a red heifer without spot and on which no yoke had ever been placed, and to slaughter it in a clean place outside the camp and burn it to ashes. Then, a priest who had been ritually purified was to combine the heifer's ashes with water. As Numbers tells us, "it is a water of sprinkling, a purification" (Numbers 19:9). For every object that was esteemed unclean in the eyes of the Law:

They shall take the burnt ashes of purification, and they shall pour upon them running water into a vessel. And a [ritually] clean man shall take hyssop and dip it into the water and sprinkle it upon the house, and the furniture, and all the souls that are therein.

(Numbers 19: 17-18)

The tradition of blessing the "home and all the souls therein" continued in the New Israel, among "the race of the Christians" as they are called in the Church's hymnology. But now, the ashes of a red heifer were replaced by the sign of the precious and life-creating Cross, the symbol of Christ's triumph over Satan and death.

In the Fourth Book of Kingdoms (5:9-14 LXX), we read the following, which tells us of the use of blessed water, which is also a prefiguring of Holy Baptism:

Neeman, a captain of the king of the Assyrians, came with his chariots and horses, and stood at the door of the house of Elisseus. And Elisseus sent a messenger to him, saying: "Go, wash seven times in the Jordan, and thy flesh shall return to thee, and thou shalt be cleansed." And Neeman was wroth, and departed, and said: "Behold, I said: He will by all means come out to me, and call on the Name of the Lord his God, and lay his hand upon the leprous place, and take it away from my flesh. Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not go and wash in them, and be cleansed?" And he turned and went away in anger. And his servants came near and said to him: "If the Prophet had spoken a

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great thing to thee, wouldest thou not have done it? Yet he hath but said to thee: 'Wash and be cleansed.'" So Neeman went down, and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh returned to him as the flesh of a little child, and he was cleansed.

We know from the 65th Canon of the Quinisext Council (+692) that some pagan customs still prevailed among the populace. Among other forms of divinization, some people would resort to wells, or lakes, or rivers at the beginning of every month in order to discern what the future held for them, which they thought to detect from the movement of the waters. The teachers of the Christian Faith warned everyone against these heathen customs, and ordained instead that the believers should, at the beginning of every month, bless themselves with water that had been sealed with the sign of the Cross of Christ. This tradition is still kept especially in monasteries, convents and parishes of the Orthodox Christian countries.

Below, with God's help, we will see what some ancient texts have to tell us about this tradition of the use of blessed water in the Church of God.

In his book, *Against Heresies* (vol. 1, chap. 12), Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus (+403), a convert from Judaism, tells us about another convert to Christianity from Judaism, Josephus, who lived during the time when Saint Constantine the Great (+336) was emperor of the Roman Empire. It seems this Josephus was eager to bring many other fellow Jews to Christianity, and so he wanted to build Christian churches in areas where many Jewish people lived. Consequently, he wanted to build a church in Tiberias, by the Sea of Galilee, but this project was hindered by some sort of magical spells and demonic conjurations cast by the Jews who resisted Josephus' efforts. Many Jews had gathered to see what Josephus would do about this.

Saint Epiphanius tells us that Josephus took a vessel of water and, with his finger, made the sign of the Cross over it while calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying the following: "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, Whom my forefathers, and the forefathers of all those here present crucified, may power be given to this water so that every spell and charm which has been cast may be annulled, and effective power be given to the fire [needed to prepare the materials needed for building the church], so that the house of the Lord may be built."

Straightway, Josephus sprinkled the blessed water on the fire and also on the lime-kilns. Immediately, the fire — which before this had been hindered by the demonic spells — flared up and began to heat the lime as was needed.

Ultimately, the church was constructed and many of the Jews believed.

In addition, we learn from Theodoret of Cyrus (+458) about a certain Bishop Marcellus of Apamia, who wanted to cast down a certain pagan temple dedicated to Zeus, but, by some demonic power, was unable to do so. The temple itself was massive and well-constructed, reinforced with iron rods and molten lead to secure the joints.

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Again, the plan was to set fire to some of the temple's supporting beams but, by God's permission, a demonic power hindered the fire from consuming the beams.

At this point, Theodoret tells us the following in his *Ecclesiastical History* (Book V, chap. 20).

Marcellus forthwith hurried to the church, ordered water to be poured into a pail, and placed the water upon the divine altar. Then, bending his head to the ground, he besought the loving Lord in no way to give in to the usurped power of the demon, but to lay bare its weakness and exhibit His own strength, lest unbelievers should henceforth find excuse for greater wrong. With these and other like words he made the sign of the cross over the water, and ordered Equitius, one of his deacons, who was armed with faith and enthusiasm, to take the water and sprinkle it in faith, and then apply it to the flame. His orders were obeyed, and the demon, unable to endure the approach of the water, fled. Then the fire, affected by its foe the water as though it had been oil, caught the wood, and consumed it in an instant. When their support had vanished, the columns themselves fell down, and dragged another twelve with them. The side of the temple which was connected with the columns was dragged down by the violence of their fall, and carried away with them. The crash, which was tremendous, was heard throughout the town, and all ran to see the sight. No sooner did the multitude hear of the flight of the hostile demon than they broke out into a hymn of praise to God.

Theodoret tells us about the holy man Aphraates also, who healed the Emperor Valen's favorite horse by blessing a vessel of water with "the symbol of the saving cross" and giving it to the horse to drink. Then, calling upon God's assistance, he blessed some oil also and rubbed it on the horse's belly. Straightway, the horse was healed (*History of Those Who Love God*, chap. 8).



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From the Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon (+613), we learn the following:

The community of the village of Apoukoumis slaughtered an ox and were eating its flesh. But it happened that all those who partook of it fell down like dead men and the meat that was left over turned black and gave forth a horrible stench. Some of the villagers who had not eaten of the meat went to the Saint to report the disaster which had occurred in their village.

And he told them that the meat had been rendered so harmful by a host of demons that had passed through the pot, and as he could not go with them himself because of the visit of a high official, he blessed some water and sent it by one of the brothers for sprinkling the sick and giving it to them to drink. When this was done, they all arose as if from sleep and only one died. For the headman John had not waited for the Saint's prayer to help his brother, but ran to a woman who used enchantments and, taking an amulet from her, hung it onto his brother, who immediately died.

In more recent times, we learn the following from the Life of Saint Seraphim of Domvu (+1602), who lived when Greece and the Balkans were occupied by the Moslem Ottoman Turks:

Once, when the Saint was still living, an endless swarm of ravaging locusts attacked the fields around Athens. The danger threatened not only the fields, but also the orchards. The Athenians remembered Saint Seraphim and sent for him so that he might drive away this peril.

When Saint Seraphim arrived, he went to the Sacred Monastery of Saint Spyridon in Piraeus, where, after a procession, he chanted the Service of the Blessing of Holy Water. When he intoned the words, "Save, O Lord, Thy people..." and cast the cross into the sea — O wonder! — that cloud of locusts gathered together, fell into the sea and drowned. Many people —

not only Christians, but even Moslems who were there — took water from the sea into which the precious cross had been immersed, and many who drank of it were healed of long-standing sicknesses. Seeing this marvel, and partaking of that holy water, which had been turned from sea water into fresh, the Athenians gave the Saint a cross of great price, together with a considerable amount of money so that he might use it for the finishing and adorning of the monastery church.

Later on in the Saint's Life, we read the following:

The miracles of the Saint did not cease after his ascent into the Heavens. He continued to guard his monastery, never permitting tyrants to violate and destroy it, though many had this intention and even issued orders for this purpose.

The people of Athens have never forgotten the miracle the Saint had worked for them. They built a church named in honor of Saint Seraphim at upper Phaleron, where they celebrate his feastday with much festivity. This is especially true of the farming people of the area surrounding Athens. In their every need, they turn to the Saint, seeking his ready assistance, bringing the Saint's holy relics and skull from his monastery, though it lies such a great distance away.

Because of the miracle of the locusts which Saint Seraphim wrought, people from many regions ask that his holy relics be brought when the locusts appear and cause great harm to their crops. The Service of Holy Water is chanted, and truly, by the fervent faith of the Christians on the one hand, and the Saint's mediation with God on the other, the plague vanishes. For according to the Saviour's divine words, faith which is free of doubt can do all things: "If ye have faith, and doubt not...if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done" (Matt. 21:21). And it was not only the pious Christians who were counted worthy of the Saint's wonderworking power; indeed, even the Hagarenes themselves, who ruled over Greece at that time, were counted worthy of the same grace. For many, witnessing the power of the Service of Holy Water which was served and blessed with the Saint's holy relics, asked for and received some of this holy water from the Christians. When they sprinkled their fields which were threatened by locusts, they too were delivered from this scourge by the wonderworking power of Saint Seraphim.

In Amarousion¹, some elders of advanced age tell of the following event which took place in their day. A certain Turk had a very large orchard of fruit trees. One spring, an enormous cloud of locusts descended upon this grove and threatened to destroy not only the tender leaves, but even the branches and the tree trunks.

Now this Turk had heard how the Christians, when faced with similar circumstances, called upon God's help through their priests. Therefore, he too invited one of the ministers of his religion, the *imam*, to beg Mohammed to help him. But even though the *imam* besought the help of him whom they esteem to be a great prophet, and though he cried out loudly from morning until night, yet this devotee of the antichrist Mohammed suffered the same fate as the priests of shame in the time of the Prophet Elias. There was, as the Scripture says, "neither voice, nor hearing" (III Kingdoms 18:26 LXX). Nothing happened.

While the Turk was in total despair as he watched his orchard being destroyed, a certain Christian promised the Turk that he would bring a Christian priest, who by his prayer would drive away the locusts.

It so happened that during those days, a priest from Saint Seraphim's monastery had been invited to Amarousion for this very purpose, which is why he had the Saint's grace-flowing skull with him. The above-mentioned Christian found this priest-monk and led him to the Turk's orchard. As soon as the priest-monk completed the Service of Holy Water, the vast cloud of locusts arose and vanished.

On seeing this marvel, the Turk thanked the priest-monk profusely, and then went and beat the *imam* mercilessly. From that time on, he never ceased proclaiming his gratitude to Saint Seraphim.²

¹ Now a district within the city limits of modern Athens.

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—Some General Information —

— Part Three —

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

The texts that have survived the ravages of the early persecutions and time itself have left us with only a few early documents. One document, *The Apostolic Constitutions* (which appear to be a compilation of materials gathered by various editors from the second to the fourth centuries, inclusive), mention an early Holy Water service, which it ascribes to one of the Apostles of the Seventy, Saint Matthias (who replaced Judas Iscariot).³ In Book Eight, chapter 29, of the *Constitutions*, we read the following about the first known Orthodox Christian Holy Water service:

Concerning the water and the oil, I, Matthias, enjoin: Let the bishop bless the water, or the oil. But if he be not there, let the presbyter bless it, the deacon standing by, and let him say thus: O Lord of hosts, the God of powers, the Creator of the waters, and the Supplier of oil, Who art compassionate and lovest mankind, Who hast given water for drink and for cleansing, and oil to give man a cheerful and joyful countenance: do Thou now also sanctify this water and this oil through Thy Christ, in the name of him [her] that has offered them, and grant them power to restore health, to drive away diseases, to banish demons, and to disperse all snares through Christ our hope, with Whom glory, honour, and worship be to Thee, and to the Holy Spirit, forever. Amen.

Saint John Chrysostom (+407) has something to say about the Great Blessing of the Waters on the Feast of Theophany (January 6th):

"For what reason do we assign the name "Epiphany" [i.e. "manifestation"] not to the day on which Christ was born, but to the day on which He was baptized? Because this is the day on which He was baptized and sanctified the nature of the waters. This, too, is the reason why at midnight of this feast, all take water and store it in their homes, keeping it the whole year, since the waters were sanctified today. The miracle of this sanctification of the waters becomes evident from the fact that the nature of the water is not altered by the passage of time. But for the whole year, and many times for two or three years, the water which was drawn today remains pure and fresh, and after so much time, is found in the same condition as the water which just now was drawn from the well.

³ See Acts 1:23-26.

(*On Holy Baptism*, PG 49:366)

Saint Ephraim the Syrian says the same in his *Hymn of Epiphany* (stroph. 4)

We know also that in the fifth century, the Church, for practical reasons, adopted the practice of having *two* Great Blessings of the Waters: the first is the blessing of the waters in a vessel or bowl in the church at the Vespers of Holy Theophany, and the second at midnight at the fountain [or lake, stream, bay, ocean, etc.] after the Vigil of the Feast, simply because many people, for a variety of reasons, were unable to attend the Midnight Service (see *PG*. 86:208). This practice continues till this very day.⁴

Is it necessary to keep a fast before partaking of Holy Water?

In the Church's holy canons and regulations, we can find no specific rules for fasting before partaking of Holy Water, just as there are no specific and universal rules for fasting before Holy Communion, except the fact that we should not have partaken of any food in the hours preceding the Holy Eucharist.

Should we partake of Holy Water before or after *antidoron*?

This is the rule of thumb that is observed on the Holy Mountain, Athos:

We partake of the gifts of God in this order:

1. Holy Communion
2. *Antidoron*
3. Holy Water
4. *Kollyva*
5. The refectory Meal
6. The *Panagia* after the refectory Meal.⁵

This is what some ancient sources have to tell us about this time-honored tradition of the Orthodox Christians.

On the feast of Theophany, we chant the following words in honor of our Lord's Baptism, but they can just as easily be applied to the waters that are blessed in the Service of the Holy Water:

Let us with rev'rence earnestly run with ardour
To the undefiled fountains of the stream of salvation
And we shall observe the Word, born of the Pure One, As He
offereth a draught for our divine thirst, which doth gently heal
the disease of the whole world.

⁴ In some usages, the second blessing takes place after the Divine Liturgy on the day of Theophany.

⁵ See pp. 164-65 of *The Great Horologion* published by Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, MA., for a description of the *Panagia* Service.

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(Fifth Iambic Ode of Theophany)⁶

Since the time of the Prophets Moses and Aaron, the People of God have cleaved to this usage of blessed water "for their homes and all the souls that dwell therein."

Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions ye have been taught, whether by word or our epistle.

(II Thess. 2:15)



⁶ Copyright, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA.