

BLESSED WATER

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).¹ 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):

¹ See Acts 1:23-26.

"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.

(*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.²

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:

² In some usages, the second blessing takes place after the Divine Liturgy on the day of Theophany.

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.³

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.

(Fifth Iambic Ode of Theophany)⁴

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)

³ 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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