

# From the desk of Fr. Jim

## On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

### Part 9: The Liturgy of Baptism (cont'd)

#### **The Font**

A liturgy of the word, including a Gospel reading and intercessory prayers, follow. It may be that a homily is also included. It is also possible for this to take place in a different part of the Church, especially if the font is located in a separate baptistery.

It should be noted with this regard that in the ancient church, and in recently built or remodeled churches, the font is a significant piece of liturgical furniture. In some churches, it is placed near the altar to remind us of both its relationship to the Eucharist and also to it as a sacrament which celebrates the Death and Resurrection of the Lord.

Even when removed from the sanctuary and altar, the relationship between them is sometimes suggested by their being constructed of similar materials and shapes. Older practices in the church allowed huge baptistries to be built as separate structures from the main church building, but this meant that people may not see the font on a regular basis. Today, it is important that the font be placed in the main church, where it stands as both a continuing reminder of our Baptism and the proper place for Baptism to occur.

#### **The Use of Holy Water**

One additional note might fit here on the use of holy water. While Jewish use of water for spiritual purification is attested even in the New Testament, the origin of its use by Christians is certainly enhanced by its use in Baptism. Dispelling illness, evil spirits and the taint of sin is all part of the motive for using holy water. It may be separately blessed as a sacramental, an instrument of blessing people and things. There is also considerable testimony to the desire of the faithful for the use of Baptismal water for this purpose.

In ancient times, the faithful would arrive at the Church at a Baptism with the specific purpose of filling containers with blessed Baptismal water. It is certainly appropriate for the faithful to use holy water in their home, and they are welcome to take water from the font. As we enter the church, it is also proper to use the Baptismal water to remind us of our own Baptism, as an act of penitence in recognizing the necessity of our being cleansed from sin, and as a reminder that as we enter the church we come into a holy and consecrated place, set apart from the world. As we return to the “outside” again, we use the holy water as a reminder to persevere in resisting the temptations of the world around us, to keep ourselves clean.

#### **A Prayer of Exorcism**

To return to the liturgy of Baptism, following the intercessions, the priest says a prayer of exorcism and either anoints with oil those who are to be baptized or extends his hands over them. The idea of a prayer of exorcism might be foreign to many people, or might conjure up medieval images.

The meaning of the word “exorcism” refers to “casting out,” in this case, any sort of evil spirit. We might also see this as a celebration of the victory of Jesus over evil. Through his Death and Resurrection and our Baptism we are incorporated into a new life of love for God and one another. This is most certainly not the way of evil, Satan or the selfishness of man. We are made ready for Christ’s welcome into this new life by this prayer of exorcism.

### **Blessing the Water**

The water to be used for Baptism is now blessed, an occurrence that is usually part of every Baptism. The solemn blessing on Holy Saturday is recalled during the season of Easter, and is renewed at other times. The prayer of blessing calls upon the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon the water.

This kind of prayer is called an “epiclesis” and is also found in the prayer over the bread and wine at the Mass. It reminds us of the description of creation:

*Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, with a divine wind (spirit, breath) sweeping over the waters.*  
**(NJB Genesis 1:2)**

The blessing of the Baptism water (and the renewal of the blessing of the font) takes place in a solemn form at the Vigil of Easter, the Saturday evening before Easter. Then a large candle, the Paschal Candle, is placed in the midst of the water of the font. This candle symbolizes the “light” or spiritual illumination that Christ brings to the world. This is summarized in the “doctrine” of the cross that teaches us the way to salvation.

### **The Ancient Baptismal Creed**

The final preparation for Baptism takes place in what might be called a test. A series of questions is presented concerning one’s turning from sin and their specific beliefs in the Holy Trinity. This ancient Baptismal creed is presented to the parents and God-parents (and all gathered for the Baptism) who answer for the child. Adults answer for themselves, but as parents and God-parents, we outline in our responses the critical elements of faith in which the child will be nurtured.