

Ask, Father James:

“Why do we bless ourselves with Holy Water when entering the church?”

In the ancient Church one usually entered the church through the baptistery. In the early church period, the holy water fonts were much bigger and as people walk into the sacred space, they bless themselves with the sacred waters of the baptismal font and re-commit themselves to their baptismal vows. Some Catholic Churches today still have the baptistery at the entrance of the church and conducts baptism from the back entrance of the church. However, in later centuries as church buildings grew larger and church entrance doors multiplied, small fonts were placed near those doors for people to sign themselves with holy water as they enter the church.

When we dip our fingers into the holy water font, either at church or at home, and make the sign of the cross, it reconnects us with the waters of our baptism and God cleanses us of every stains of secularity and the Holy Trinity surround us with protection and grace. Like the Psalmist prayed: *Sprinkle me, O Lord, with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed; wash me, and I shall be made whiter than the snow. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me (Psalm 51).*

Signing oneself with holy water as one enters the church naturally is a connection to our baptism. Baptism is the foundational sacrament that admits us to being members of the church of Christ. The water used for baptisms and poured in the holy water fonts was blessed once a year at the Easter Vigil and preserved for the whole year. During the liturgical service at the Easter Vigil, the congregation is reminded of the many saving acts of God in history that occurred through water. The blessing concludes when the Easter candle, representing the Light of Christ, is lowered into the water three times. By this act the water becomes “holy” and set apart for this specific function.

The water that flowed from the side of Christ is immersed in the baptismal waters during its blessing when the paschal candle is dipped into the water on Easter vigil. The practice of placing sand in the fonts for Lent is not prescribed by any liturgical norms and at no point in the liturgical year is it appropriate to cease dipping our fingers in holy water or to stop remembering our baptism.



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