

Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water Within Mass: Analysis and Critique

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Introduction

Here I offer an analysis and critique of the Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water within Mass, as it is presented in the 1970/1975 *Missale Romanum* and in the English-language *Sacramentary* (Canadian edition, 1974/1983; United States [Liturgical Press] edition, 1974). This is a brief and optional rite that may be part of the Introductory Rites of the eucharist.

The use of a brief rite that has to do with baptism at the beginning of the Sunday eucharist is indeed highly desirable. However, I am critical of the present Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water, as the present study shows.

Analysis and Critique

Title:

The title, Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water, is a translation of the *Missale Romanum*'s *Ordo ad faciendam et aspergendam aquam benedictam*.

This title is quite traditional, but would be improved if it included an explicit reference to baptism. Any baptismal significance has to be inferred from the fact that water is involved.

Location in the Liturgical Book:

In the *Missale Romanum* the *Ordo ad faciendam...* is placed in an appendix at the end of the book; there is no note or cross-reference to this appendix at the place where it is supposed to be used in the *Ordo Missae*.

In the 1988 German *Messbuch*, the water rite is likewise placed in an appendix at the end of the book. However, a note and cross-reference to this rite has been added at the end of the penitential rite.

In the 1977 French *Missel Romain* the water rite is given as a fourth option within the penitential rite. The Invitation, Absolution and rubrics are printed in place, while the three prayers over water are printed following the conclusion of the order of mass.

In the 1983 Canadian English-language edition of the *Sacramentary*, this rite is printed in full immediately before the Introductory Rites of the eucharist, but not actually within the Order of Mass.

In the 1974 United States (Liturgical Press) edition, this rite is printed within the Order of Mass, as the first item among the Introductory Rites.

The last-named location is clearly preferable. Other arrangements may suggest that the water rite is not very important, or an afterthought, or may contribute to its being overlooked or neglected.

An Option

The rubrics say, “When this rite is celebrated it takes the place of...” It is therefore an option. The Canadian edition adds, “The rite of blessing and sprinkling holy water may be celebrated...”

For Sunday

The Canadian edition states that this rite “may be celebrated in all churches and chapels at all Sunday Masses celebrated on Sunday or on Saturday evening.” These specifications presumably were added not only for clarity but also because the use of the corresponding water rite in the pre-Vatican II liturgy was restricted in various ways, e.g., the principal Sunday mass.

I would suggest that this baptismally-related rite also be used (or at least be an option) in various ritual masses even if they do not occur on Sunday, e.g., ordinations, religious profession, consecration of virgins, blessing of abbots/abbesses.

Usage

The rubrics state that “when this rite is celebrated it takes the place of the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass. The Lord have mercy is also omitted. After greeting the people the priest remains standing at his chair.” The water rite is then begun.

Structure:

The Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water has a five-fold structure:

1. Invitation and introduction, followed by a period of silent prayer.
2. A prayer of blessing over the water.
3. Blessing of salt; this is an option and will not be considered further.

4. Sprinkling of the people with the blessed water.
5. An “absolution”.

Ministry:

The presiding priest speaks the invitation, prayer over the water and absolution, all of which are worded in the first person plural. The priest also makes the sign of the cross over the water during the prayer of blessing, and does the sprinkling.

The rubrics indicate the presence of the priest’s “ministers” and of “the rest of the clergy,” but these have no special role during the rite.

The dominant role of the priest in this rite is also found in the Rite of Baptism for Children. In both cases it is unfortunate and does not adequately express the meaning of baptism, in which laity share in the priestly, prophetic and ruling ministry of Jesus Christ. There is little recognition of the full, active and conscious participation in the liturgy that is based in baptism and that is the basic principle of the renewed liturgy.

Participation

The people are invited to pray silently at the beginning of the water rite. This is good, though experience has shown that they are not always given time to do this.

The people respond by saying Amen at the end of the blessing prayer and again after the absolution.

They receive the sprinkled water. Though the rubrics do not specify this, people often make the sign of the cross when sprinkled.

Finally, they may be given the opportunity to sing during the sprinkling.

Nonverbal elements:

The rubrics state that “A vessel containing the water to be blessed is placed before” the priest at the beginning of the rite. Following the prayer of blessing, they continue, “Taking the sprinkler, the priest sprinkles himself and his ministers, then the rest of the clergy and people. He may move through the church for the sprinkling of the people.” He then “returns to his place.”

Musical elements:

The rubrics state that during the sprinkling, “an antiphon or appropriate song is sung.” It is significant that the rubric says “is” rather than “may be.”

Who sings is not specified: the people, choir, a cantor? Many modern hymnals do provide music for the people at this point, though this may also be sung by others.

Verbal Elements: Overview

As already indicated, there is (a) an invitation and introduction, (b) a prayer over the water, and (c) an “absolution.” All are spoken by the priest, though worded in the third person plural, making them the prayer of the entire assembly. The people respond to the prayer and the absolution by saying Amen.

Two alternative texts of the prayer over water are provided for ordinary or regular use, and a third for use during the Easter season alone.

The prayers over the water are prayers of petition, including the petition that God “bless this water.”

The two prayers over water for ordinary use and the absolution give the impression that the Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water is indeed another form of the penitential rite, oriented toward sin and cleansing. The prayer over water for the Easter season is quite different in tone, though followed by the same absolution.

Each of the texts will now be considered in turn. I will not comment on the use of exclusively masculine language, as this was in common usage at the time this rite was prepared in the late 1960s.

Invitation

The text is as follows:

Dear friends,
this water will be used
to remind us of our baptism.
Ask God to bless it,
and to keep us faithful
to the Spirit he has given us.

The presence and participation of the people is acknowledged (“Dear friends”) and the meaning and purpose of the water rite is stated: “this water will be used to remind us of our baptism.”

The assembly is directed first to “ask God to bless” [the water], and secondly to “ask God...to keep us faithful to the Spirit he has given us.” A pause for silent prayer is then provided, for all to pray as directed.

Presumably, “faithful to the Spirit [God] has given us” is a reference to baptism.

The meanings of “remind us of our baptism” and “bless” this water will be considered below.

Prayer over Water 1

This text is for use through the year, except during the Easter season.

God our Father,
your gift of water
brings life and freshness to the earth;
it washes away our sins
and brings us eternal life.
We ask you now
to bless this water,
and to give us your protection on this day
which you have made your own.
Renew the living spring of your life within us
and protect us in spirit and body,
that we may be free from sin
and come into your presence
to receive your gift of salvation.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

After addressing God (“God our Father”), the prayer begins by making two statements or affirmations. The first refers to creation “Your gift of water brings life and freshness to the earth.”

The second says, “your gift of water... washes away our sins and brings eternal life.” This could be a reference (at least in part) to baptism, but not necessarily so. Instead it seems to point to the water of the Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water. The “sins” referred to seem to be serious enough to keep us from “eternal life.” It thus implies that the water has the power to “wash away” such serious sins, and this power in turn seems to be a consequence of God’s blessing of the water.

The prayer continues with four petitions. The first asks God “to bless this water.”

The second petition is “to give us your protection”; this is followed by a reference to Sunday: “on this day which you have made your own.” What, however, is the relationship between God’s blessing this water and God’s giving us protection? Further, if this rite is to remind us of our baptism, what relationship is there between baptism and “protection.”

The third petition is “renew the living spring of your life among us,” presumably using baptismal allusions. How the blessing of the water and its sprinkling “renew God’s life with us” is not clarified. One wonders as well if “renew” here is equivalent or related to the “remind us of our baptism” of the invitation, or if it is meant to have a distinct meaning.

The fourth petition is for God to “protect us in spirit and body.” Two consequences of the “renewal” and “protection” just prayed for are now named: to “be free of sin” and to “come into your presence to receive your gift of salvation.” This seems again to express concern about serious sins and regarding death and going to heaven. The water appears to have this power in virtue of God’s blessing.

Prayer over Water 2

This text also is for ordinary or regular use outside the Easter season.

Lord God almighty,
creator of all life,
of body and soul,
we ask you to bless this water:
as we use it in faith,
forgive our sins
and save us from all illness
and the power of evil.
Lord, in your mercy
give us living water,
always springing up as a fountain of salvation:
free us, body and soul, from every danger,
and admit us to your presence
in purity of heart.
Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Like the first prayer, this one also begins with an address to God, “Lord God almighty” and a reference to creation: “creator of all life, [creator] of body and soul.” Here and below a dualistic anthropology of “body and soul” is expressed; this is probably equivalent to the “spirit and body” of the first text.

The first of six petitions is that God “bless this water;” reference is then made to our use of it and to our faith: “as we use it in faith.”

The next three petitions are “forgive us our sins,” “save us from all illness,” and “save us... from the power of evil.” These are serious and powerful problems, requiring corresponding power to overcome. As in the first prayer, the water that we use in faith seems to have this power in virtue of God’s blessing. Though forgiveness of sin can be recognized as baptismal language, here it probably has a broader meaning. Being saved from illness and from the power of evil do not reflect contemporary baptismal understandings.

The fifth petition uses the language of baptism, “give us living water, always springing up as a fountain of salvation.”

The sixth petition reverts to the language of protection: “free us, body and soul, from every danger.”

Finally, God is asked to “admit us to your presence in purity of heart,” again expressing a concern with sin, death, and going to heaven.

Collectively, these two prayers contain several different types of language. One is related to the contemporary liturgy of baptism, while another might be related to the pre-Vatican II baptismal liturgy. A third type predominates, however. To a large extent these texts seem to be prayers for protection; the water has a protective or apotropaic effect in consequence of its being blessed. This of course in no way reflects contemporary theology.

Prayer over Water 3

This prayer is for use during the Easter season.

Lord God almighty,
hear the prayers of your people:
we celebrate our creation and redemption.
Hear our prayers and bless + this water
which gives fruitfulness to the fields,
and refreshment and cleansing to man.
You chose water to show your goodness
when you led your people to freedom
through the Red Sea
and satisfied their thirst in the desert
with water from the rock.
Water was the symbol used by the prophets
to foretell your new covenant with man.
You made the water of baptism holy
by Christ's baptism in the Jordan:
by it you give us a new birth
and renew us in holiness.
May this water remind us of our baptism,
and let us share in the joy
of all who have been baptized at Easter.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

It is obvious that this text differs markedly from the first two. It is biblical, contemporary, and clearly linked to baptism, though its language does not actually borrow from that of the liturgy of baptism. With the addition of an invocation of the Holy Spirit, most of this text could be used as a prayer over the water in the baptismal liturgy..

Absolution

The text follows:

May almighty God cleanse us of our sins,
and through the eucharist we celebrate
make us worthy to sit at his table
in his heavenly kingdom. Amen.

I sometimes put "absolution" in quotes because although it is a prayer for the forgiveness of sins and is spoken by the priest, it is worded in the first person plural rather than the first person singular. All, therefore, are praying that the sins of all be forgiven, rather than the priest alone praying in his own name that the sins of the people be forgiven.

The first part is quite straightforward, “May almighty God cleanse us of our sins.” This sounds very much like the end of a penitential rite.

The second part, however, is appreciably different. It first names the liturgy for which all have gathered: “the eucharist we celebrate today.” We then ask that “through” our celebration of the eucharist may God “make us worthy to sit at his table in his heavenly kingdom.”

From one perspective this text again infers a concern with sin, death and going to heaven. From another, it makes a connection between the Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water and the rest of the Sunday eucharist, as well as between baptism and eucharist in general (though the nature of this relationship is not indicated).

“Remind Us of Our Baptism”

It is now appropriate to ask what the invitation and prayer over water 3 mean by stating or praying that the water and its sprinkling may “remind us of our baptism.” I suggest that the term “remind” is inadequate and inappropriate on several grounds.

First, it seems to lead us from the present into the past, to our own baptism, and then leave us there. Thus it seems to have little to do with our baptismal lives today, as well as the life of the church and the world today. This kind of reminding seems undesirable.

Again, for those baptized as infants it also asks for something that is humanly impossible: we simply cannot remember the baptismal celebration that took place when we were so young.

Thirdly, prayers 1 and 2 do not use the language and concepts of baptism as it is celebrated and understood today. In significant ways they do not even connect with the language of the pre-Vatican II baptismal liturgy. They therefore are conceptually and linguistically unable to remind us of baptism. In contrast, of course, the language of prayer 3 very successfully relates to baptism.

Sources

From the perspective of the year 2002, the first two prayers over water and the absolution seem to be the product of a very different world and world-view than our own.. Where did these come from? What were their sources?

It may be recalled that two water-blessing rites preceded the main Sunday mass prior to the liturgical renewal of Vatican Council II. The first was the blessing of holy water (*Ordo ad faciendam aquam beneiectam*), and the second was the blessing of the people with holy water (*Benedictio populi cum aqua benedicta*). The second is perhaps better known from its initial words in Latin, *Asperges me* (“Sprinkle me O Lord, with hyssop, and I shall be purified; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow”).

Of the several prayers included in this *Ordo ad faciendam aquam benedictam*, the principal prayer of blessing the water most seems to resemble the post-Vatican II texts. This text is as follows:

O God, for the salvation of mankind
you built your greatest mysteries on this substance, water;
in your kindness hear our prayers
and pour down the power of your blessing + into this element,
made ready for many kinds of purification.
May this, your creature, become an agent of divine grace in the service of your mysteries,
to drive away evil spirits and dispel sickness,
so that everything in the homes and other buildings of the faithful
that is sprinkled with this water may be rid of all uncleanness and freed from every harm.
Let no breath of infection, no disease-bearing air remain in these places.
May the wiles of the lurking enemy provide of no avail.
Let whatever might menace the safety and peace of those who live here
be put to flight by the sprinkling of this water,
so that the health obtained by calling upon your holy name
may be made secure against all attack.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Collectio Rituum (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1964, p. 419)

It may be seen that this text emphasizes the protective efficacy of holy water, and includes many of the same points that are found in prayers 1 and 2 of the present Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water.

Within its own theological perspective, this prayer is direct and clear. It also clarifies aspects of the modern prayers over water 1 and 2. However, it is simply out of date and the contemporary liturgy should not use it for inspiration.

The prayers of the pre-Vatican II rite of baptism do not come as close to prayers 1 and 2 of the present rite as the text given above.

Blessing of Holy Water outside Mass

The present Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water within Mass was prepared in the late 1960s and published in Latin and in English in 1970. It therefore did not have the benefit of some of the theological and liturgical developments that occurred later.

Another liturgical book, called *De Benedictionibus* (1984) in Latin and *Book of Blessings* in English (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1989), contains a rite called Order for the Blessing of Holy Water Outside Mass (pp. 519-522). This is excellent. In the first place, introductory remarks speak of “reminding” in clear and helpful ways.

The blessing of this water reminds us of Christ, the living water, and of the sacrament of baptism, in which we were born of water and the Holy Spirit. Whenever, therefore, we are sprinkled with this holy water or use it in blessing ourselves on entering the church or at home, we thank God for his priceless gift to us and we ask for his help to keep us

faithful to the sacrament we have received in faith. (p 520)

A shorter statement, which may be spoken to accompany the sprinkling, is also good:

Let this water call to mind our baptism into Christ,
who has redeemed us by his death and resurrection. Amen. (p 522)

Secondly, none of the prayers over the water ask God to “bless” the water. Rather, in line with modern biblical studies and theological reflection, the prayers bless God.

Thirdly, the texts of the prayers over water speak clearly of baptism and employ contemporary theological language. The texts of the three prayers follow.

A

Blessed are you, Lord, all powerful God,
who in Christ, the living water of salvation,
blessed and transformed us.
Grant that, when we are sprinkled with this water or make use of it,
we will be refreshed inwardly by the power of the Holy Spirit
and continue to walk in the new life we received at baptism.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

B

Lord, holy Father,
look with kindness on your children,
redeemed by your Son
and born to a new life by water and the Holy Spirit.
Grant that those who are sprinkled with this water
may be renewed in body and spirit
and may make a pure offering of their service to you.
We ask this through Christ our Lord

C

O God, the Creator of all things,
by water and the Holy Spirit
you have given the universe its beauty
and fashioned us in your own image.
Bless and purify your Church.

O Christ the Lord, from your pierced side
you gave us your sacraments
as fountains of salvation.
Bless and purify your Church.

O Holy Spirit, giver of life,
from the baptismal font of the church
you have formed us into a new creation in the waters of rebirth.
Bless and purify your Church. (pp 521-522)

This is the kind of prayer that ought to be used in the Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water of the eucharistic liturgy!

Additional alternatives to the present Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water are offered in the separate document, Rite of Affirmation of Baptism for the Sunday Eucharist.