

The Blessing of Water

IN THE MODERN PRACTICE of the Orthodox Church there are two rites for the blessing of water: the lesser blessing and the great blessing. Furthermore, the blessing of water is a part of the order of the sacrament of baptism. At a hierarchal liturgy, before the great entrance, the prayer at the blessing of water (“O Lord our God, who didst sanctify the streams of Jordan by thy redeeming manifestation . . .”) is read at the washing of the bishop’s hands; this same prayer is found in the order of the consecration of a church.

Water as a religious symbol and the blessing of water at the sacrament of baptism have been discussed above in the section devoted to that sacrament.¹ In this section we will examine the service orders for the great and lesser blessings of water.

The Great Blessing of Water

The order of the great blessing of water takes place on the eve and on the actual day of the feast of Theophany. As early as the fourth century the water drawn on the feast of Theophany had come to be widely viewed as possessing particular sanctity. John Chrysostom says:

On this day all, having obtained the waters, do carry it home and keep it all year, since today the waters are sanctified. And an obvious phenomenon occurs: these waters in their essence do not spoil with the passage of time, but obtained today, for one whole year and often for two or three years, they remain unharmed and fresh.²

In the sixth century in the Byzantine East the order of the blessing of water on the feast of Theophany was a universal custom. This practice in Jerusalem is attested by Anthony of Piacenza (570), while the practice in Constantinople was described by Paul

the Silentiary. The order of the great blessing of water is set forth in ancient Greek liturgical manuscripts, including the *Barberini Euchologion* (late eighth century) and the *Typicon of the Great Church* (ninth and tenth centuries). Furthermore, all the primary prayers and readings presently contained in this order are already found in the earliest known manuscripts. The custom of a twofold blessing of water—on the eve of Theophany and on the day of the feast itself—is taken from the *Jerusalem Typicon*. In Russia the first blessing of water took place in the church, and the second at “the Jordan,” that is, at a hole in the ice, in which those who wished would immerse themselves following the rite.³ This custom of immersing oneself in the ice hole remains to this day, and has gained wide popularity in recent years.⁴

The order of the great blessing of water takes place at the liturgy after the prayer behind the ambon and two repetitions of “Blessed be the name of the Lord.” The rite begins with the singing of these troparia:

The voice of the Lord upon the waters crieth out, saying: “Come, receive all of you the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of the fear of God, of Christ Who is made manifest.

Today the nature of the waters is sanctified, and the Jordan is divided, and turns back the streams of its own waters, beholding the Master baptized.

As a man thou didst come to the river, O Christ the King, hastening to receive the baptism of a servant, O Good One, at the hand of the Forerunner, because of our sins, O Lover of Mankind.

Taking the form of a servant, O Lord, Thou didst come to the voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” asking for baptism, O Thou Who knowest not sin. The waters saw Thee and were afraid. The Forerunner began to tremble and cried out, saying: “How shall the lamp illumine the Light? How shall the servant lay hands upon the Master? Sanctify me and the waters, O Savior, Who takest away the sins of the world.”

This is followed by three excerpts from the book of the prophet Jonah, which in the Christian tradition are viewed as a prediction of New Testament baptism. These are followed by a reading from an epistle of St Paul (1 Cor 10.1–4), which interprets the passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea as a prefiguration of baptism, and a Gospel reading (Mk 1.9–11) describing Jesus' baptism by John. Next comes the great litany with additional petitions that the water be sanctified (identical to those said at the litany during the sacrament of baptism). As the litany is intoned the priest reads the prayer, "O Lord Jesus Christ, thou Only-begotten Son . . .," asking that the minds of the worshippers be illumined by the Holy Spirit, and that the prayers offered over the water be accepted. Then the priest intones aloud, "Great art thou, O Lord . . .," and reads the prayer of blessing of the water, beginning with the words, "For thou, of thine own good will, hast brought into being all things which before were not."⁵



The Procession of the Tree of the Precious Cross. Icon. 16th c.

After reading the prayer the priest immerses the cross three times in a vessel of water, as the troparion of Theophany, "When thou wast baptized in the Jordan, O Lord," is sung three times.⁶ The immersion of the cross in the water is what distinguishes the rite of the great and lesser blessings of water from the rite that takes place during the sacrament of baptism, where the water is sanctified through the immersion of the priest's hand and anointing the water with blessed oil.

Then the priest sprinkles holy water over the faithful in all four directions. The stichera of the feast of Theophany are sung, beginning "Let us sing, O faithful." Following the stichera the choir sings

"Blessed be the name of the Lord," and the dismissal of the divine liturgy is given.

In the church Typicon, holy water that is blessed on the feast of Theophany is called "the great agiasma," or holy thing. It is customarily drunk only on an empty stomach (which, incidentally, is contrary to both the Typicon and the Menaion⁷). A vessel of holy water always stands in the church, and the faithful keep the water of Theophany in their homes throughout the year. The water blessed on Theophany is used for drinking, for anointing, and for sprinkling people, churches, homes, and various objects. In accordance with the words of the service it is perceived as "a fountain of incorruption, a gift of sanctification, a loosing of sins, a healing of sicknesses." In Old Russia there was even a special order of "communing" of holy water, and in the disciplinary canons of Byzantium (particularly the Nomocanon of John the Faster) drinking holy water was permitted to those who were barred from the sacrament of the Eucharist for canonical reasons. This, however, by no means meant that holy water was seen as a substitute for communion.

The Lesser Blessing of Water

In Constantinople the order of the lesser blessing of water was served on August 1, on the feast of the Procession of the Tree of the Precious and Life-giving Cross of the Lord. On this day in the capital of Byzantium a procession took place with the tree of the cross (described in detail in the tenth century by the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus⁸), and the life-giving tree would be immersed in water. Another tradition, which may possibly have influenced the formation of the rite of the lesser blessing, was the custom of bathing in the spring of the Church of the Most Holy Theotokos in Blachernae, Constantinople. By the twelfth century the lesser blessing of water was served in Constantinople on the first of each month. The earliest surviving manuscripts of the order of the lesser blessing date back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁹

The modern order of the lesser blessing of water begins with the exclamation, “Blessed is our God,” followed by the trisagion prayers and Psalm 142. Next “God is the Lord,” the troparion “Let us who are lowly and sinful, now diligently run to the Theotokos,” and the troparion “Never shall we who are unworthy” are sung. Then Psalm 50 is read, after which twenty-four short troparia to the Theotokos are sung. The first troparion—“O Virgin who didst receive from the angel the salutation ‘Rejoice!’ and gavest birth unto thine own Creator, save them that magnify thee”—serves as the model for the other troparia, which are linked by an alphabetical acrostic.¹⁰ Joined to this group of twenty-four troparia to the Theotokos are several short troparia to saints, followed by the exclamation, “For holy art thou, O our God.” After the exclamation another four troparia to the Theotokos are sung, beginning with the words, “Now the time is drawn nigh which sanctifieth all men.” One of the troparia—“O Christ, who through the waters dost rain down a fountain of healings in the all-honourable temple of the Virgin”¹¹—is referring to the church in Blachernae, where this “fountain of healings” was located. Both groups of troparia, of twenty-four and of four, are found in the earliest known manuscript, which contains the rite of the lesser blessing of water and dates back to 1027 (Paris Coislin 213).

Upon completion of the troparia, which conclude with the trisagion being sung once, a prokeimenon is intoned, consisting of verses from Psalm 23, and a passage from the epistles is read (Heb 2.11–18) on the subject of sanctification and cleansing of sins through the incarnation of the Son of God. The Gospel reading describes the Sheep’s Pool in Jerusalem, on which an angel would descend from time to time, and the first to enter the water after the troubling of the waters would be restored to health.



Icon of the Theotokos the Life-bearing Font. Crete. 15th c.

Next follows a great litany with petitions that the water be sanctified, and a prayer that differs in content from the one read at the rite of the great blessing of water:

O Lord our God, who art mighty in counsel, and wonderful in thy deeds . . . and receivest the devout tears of all who are in distress: (For this cause thou didst come in the similitude of a servant, scorning not our image, but giving true health to the body, and saying: Lo, thou art healed, sin no more; and with clay thou didst make the man’s eyes whole, and having commanded him to wash, didst make him, by thy word, to rejoice in the light, putting to confusion the enemies’ floods of passion, and drying up the bitter sea of the life of the same, and subduing the waves of sensual desires heavy to be endured): Do thou, the same King who lovest mankind, who hast granted unto us to clothe ourselves in the garment of snowy whiteness by water and the Spirit, send down upon us thy blessing, and through partaking of this water, through sprinkling therewith wash away the defilement of passions.

The prayer goes on to mention the Theotokos and several saints. Then there are petitions for the ecclesiastical and secular authorities, for “those who hate us, and those who love us,” for those in

captivity and in affliction. A prominent feature of this prayer is the absence of special petitions that the water be sanctified. Thus, the water is sanctified not by invoking the Holy Spirit, but by coming into contact with the tree of the precious cross.¹²

Following this prayer and the words of the priest, “Peace be unto all,” a short prayer is read from the rite of the great blessing of water (“Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hearken unto us”), after which the priest immerses a cross into the water to the singing of the troparion, “O Lord, save thy people,” and then sprinkles the church and all those present with holy water. The order concludes with the singing of troparia to the Theotokos and the holy unmercenaries, a small litany, the exclamation “Hearken unto us, O God our Saviour,” and the prayer “O greatly merciful Master,” a prayer comprising part of the litiya at the all-night vigil and of certain other liturgical rites. Here this prayer with its commemoration of the saints takes the place of the dismissal.

In the current practice of the Russian Orthodox Church the lesser blessing of water takes place on the feast of the Procession of the Cross (August 1), on the feast in honor of the icon of the Mother of God the Life-bearing Font (on Friday of Bright Week), and at the midfeast of Pentecost. As a rule the lesser blessing of water is also served on a church’s patronal feast. At the request of the faithful a lesser blessing of water is frequently served on other days as well, and may be served in the home.

Unlike the water of Theophany, water blessed using the lesser order is not drunk only on an empty stomach. In all other aspects it is used just like the water of Theophany: it is drunk unto the healing of soul and body; it is used to sprinkle churches, homes, and people; and it is used for the blessing of icons, liturgical items, vehicles, and household items.

Notes

¹Cf. pp. 34–35 and 59–64 of this volume.

²Chrysostom, *Discourse on the Day of the Baptism of Christ* (available online: <https://oca.org/fs/sermons/discourse-on-the-day-of-the-baptism-of-christ>).

³Mikhail Zheltov, “Vodoosvyashchenie” [The Blessing of Water], in *Pravoslav-naya entsiklopediya* [The Orthodox Encyclopedia], vol. 9, 140–148 (Moscow: Tserkovno-nauchnyy tsentr “Pravoslavnaya entsiklopediya,” 2005).

⁴In Greece the custom is somewhat different: on the feast of Theophany the priest throws a wooden cross into the water, and the young people dive into the water after it, competing to be the first to retrieve it.

⁵The text of this prayer is included above in the service order of the sacrament of baptism, on pages 61–62.

⁶The text of the troparion is found in vol. 4, pp. 291–292.

⁷See, for example, the *Typikon* [Typicon], part 2 (St. Petersburg: Redaktsionno-izdatel’skoe obedinenie “Sankt-Peterburg,” 1992), 391–392: “Let all be aware concerning the Holy Water: those who abstain from drinking the Holy Water because they have eaten are not acting correctly; for the Holy Water has been provided by the grace of God for the sanctification of the world and all creation. Wherefore, it is sprinkled in all places, even dishonorable ones, and even in places where it may be trodden underfoot. Where, then, is the logic in abstaining from it? But be aware that impurity comes upon us not because of eating, but because of our abominable acts; and that we may be cleansed from them, we drink this Holy Water without doubting.” [Translation taken from <https://stmaximus.org/files/ConfTong/140105CT.pdf>.—*Trans.*]

⁸Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis* 2.8 (PG 112:1005C–1008A).

⁹Zheltov, “Vodoosvyashchenie,” 145.

¹⁰That is, each troparion begins with one of the letters of the Greek alphabet in order. In the Slavonic translation, naturally, this acrostic is lost.

¹¹Most English translations mistakenly refer to Christ himself as the fountain.—*Trans.*

¹²Incidentally, the majority of editions of the Book of Needs contain “another prayer over the water.” This prayer notably contains these words: “Thine unworthy servants now humbly pray and entreat thee: send the grace of the Most Holy Spirit upon this water, and by thy heavenly blessing bless, purify, and sanctify it.”