

Chapter 12



Epiphany and the Blessing of Water

Water! What an amazing gift! A few drops lift up a plant's drooping leaves, or refresh a human body. You can wash in it, splash in it, swim in it. You can relish in its sounds—the babble of a brook or the roaring of the sea, or the breaking of the waves upon the sandy beach. Life springs from water. Not just physical life but spiritual life as well. For we are born anew in baptism of water and the Spirit.

Partly because we take water for granted, partly because it's cheaper than dirt (in most cities a ton of water delivered to your kitchen costs about 15 cents), we use it lavishly. We each draw about 87 gallons a day: 24 for flushing, 32 for bathing, laundry, and dishwashing, and 25 for swimming pools and watering the lawn. We use only two gallons a day for drinking and cooking—the only water we actually require in order to survive.

But this is just the beginning. An immense amount of water is needed for irrigation and industrial use. For example, the eggs you ate for breakfast this morning required 120 gallons of water each; the steak you might have for dinner, 3,500 gallons; the ton of steel in your car 60,000 gallons. When we consider these indirect uses of water, our daily need soars to 2,000 gallons each day for each person.

Not Running Out

Despite this staggering use of water, experts do not think we'll be running out of water. They tell us that four trillion gallons of rain water falls on the United States each day and that we use a mere tenth of it. Most of this one tenth returns to its source. The rest escapes into the atmosphere, but only briefly. None is lost; the water that St. John used to baptize Jesus still exists. Its billions of molecules are now dispersed throughout the world.

Water is absolutely essential to human life. It carries blood through the 60,000 miles of arteries, capillaries and veins in our bodies. It is necessary for digestion. It lubricates our joints, keeps mucous membranes moist, and enables our eyes to function. It regulates our body heat, and it is essential to all plant and animal life, which are so important to human survival.

Modern science has discovered that all of life on earth came out of water. In primeval times, all life, including ours, was in the sea. Modern obstetrics has shown that the human embryo is born from the amniotic fluid in the mother's womb, and that this fluid has the same composition as sea water.

Primordial Element

Tertullian talks of water as the primordial element in which life appears: "First of all, O man, you should have reverence for the antiquity of the waters as a primordial element. . . . Once the elements of the world were set in order, when it was to be given inhabitants, it was the primordial waters which were commanded to produce living creatures. The primordial water brought forth life, so that no one should be astonished that in Baptism the waters are able to give life" (Bapt. 2). Tertullian bases these words on Genesis I where water is indeed the primordial element in creation.

How beautiful is the metaphor Jesus used so often: "the water of life." Water is life! As the body must have water, so the soul must have the water of life. The Bible closes with an invitation to drink of that water: "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

Why Water as a Means of Grace?

Speaking on the use of water as a means of grace, St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote: "If you wish to know why it is by means of

water and not some other element that grace is given, you will find the reason in going through the Scriptures. Water is a wonderful thing:—and the most beautiful of the four sensible elements of the cosmos. The sky is the dwelling of the angels, but the skies are made of water; earth is the home of men, but the earth has come out of the waters; and before the creation of visible things in six days, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. The water is the principle of the Cosmos, and the Jordan of the Gospel” (XXXIII, 433A).

Tertullian says that as the primordial waters of creation begot the fish, the baptismal water begets “little fishes” or “little Christs.” He writes in *De Baptismo*: “We are little fishes according to *the ichthys* (FISH), Jesus Christ, in Whom we are born, and we only live by remaining in the water” (De Bapt. I).

It is clear why the Church uses water as a sign of the divine life of grace. We rise from the waters of baptism into a new life, born again of water and the Spirit. In those same waters the old nature is drowned and put to death. The creative as well as the destructive element in water expresses powerfully what God does for us in the waters of baptism.

The Blessing of Water

The blessing of water through prayer and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, with the immersion in the water of a small ceremonial cross, had been introduced into liturgical use in the fourth century. Through sprinkling, by sealing with the sign of the cross and by drinking of the blest water, the faithful are cleansed and sanctified. The sanctified water was used for the healing of soul and body, and for protection against evil. Gradually it came to be used even for the healing of sick animals and for the blessing of God on new homes and buildings. The Church prays in this Rite of the Blessing of the Waters: “that those who sprinkle and partake thereof (of the Holy Water) may receive it for the cleansing of souls and bodies, for the healing of sickness, for the sanctification of houses, and sufficient for every need.”

At Epiphany the Church prays over the water as it does at every baptism:

“Therefore, O King who loves mankind, do Thou Thyself be present now as then through the descent of Thy Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water.”

“Confer upon it the grace of redemption, the blessing of the Jordan. Make it a . . . gift of sanctification, a remission of sins, a protection against disease, a destruction to demons . . . filled with angelic strength: that all who draw from it and partake of it may have it for the cleansing of their soul and body . . . for the sanctification of their dwellings . . .”

The baptismal water as well as the water that is distributed on Epiphany is blessed by a prayer which recalls beautifully all the events of salvation which were in any way connected with water, from the beginning of our world when God’s Spirit hovered over the water, down to the commandment of Jesus to baptize.

For example, listen to the words of St. Sophronius:

*“For Thou art our God, Who hast renewed
through water and the Spirit our nature
grown old through sin.*

*Thou art our God Who hast drowned sin
through water in the days of Noah.*

*Thou art our God Who, through the
waters of the sea, at Moses’ hand hast set free
the Hebrew nation from
the bondage of Pharoah.*

*Thou art our God Who hast cleft the
rock in the wilderness: the waters
gushed out, the streams overflowed, and
Thou hast satisfied Thy thirsty people.*

*Thou art our God Who by water and
fire through Elijah hast brought
back Israel from the error of Baal.’”*

In Rev. 22:1-3 we read of the river of the water of life that flows from the throne of God yielding each month twelve kinds of fruit on the trees that lined the river on either side. The leaves of the trees were for the healing of all nations. See also Ezekiel 47:1-12. Note that the river of the water of life has its source at the very throne of God.

The blessed water we receive on Epiphany is like the healing water that flows into our lives from the very throne of God, nourishing our parched souls that they may bear fruit for God’s glory.

The Abode of the Serpent

In the ancient Near East, water was considered the home of the monsters of the abyss, the dragons of the depths. It was the abode of the serpent that tempted the first man. God cursed the serpent, but Jesus came to crush its head in the waters of the Jordan, to destroy the abode of sin and death from which man would have to be snatched.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, in his Catechesis, speaks of the sanctification of all things by the Baptism of Christ. All creation was made holy by the fact that Jesus descended into the waters of the Jordan and the Holy Spirit came down upon Him and upon the waters at the same time, driving out the devil and making them the instrument through which the new creation, the new man in Christ, was to be born.

He writes:

“When, therefore, it was time to crush the head of the dragon, Christ descended into the waters and bound the strong one, in order that we might receive the power to tread upon serpents and scorpions. This was no small beast, but a terrible one, bringing death to all who met him. But life came to our rescue in order that death might be shut up in prison forever, and in order that we might all say: ‘O death where is thy victory?’ By baptism the sting of death is taken away.”

The River Jordan

The river Jordan in which Jesus was baptized is replete with meaning in the history of our salvation. Fr. Thomas Hopko brings this out most effectively when he writes:

The river Jordan plays a very important role in the Bible. Before it becomes the river in which Jesus the Messiah is baptized, it is revealed as the river which bounds the “promised land.” To cross the Jordan, for the people of Israel, was to enter into the fulfillment of the Lord’s promises. It was to enter into the “land flowing with milk and honey,” the place where God would dwell with His people providing them with the endless blessings of His presence.

In the New Testament, with its spiritual and mystical fulfillment of the Old, to cross the Jordan was to

enter into the Kingdom of God, to experience the fullness of the life of the age to come. The fact that Moses was not blessed to cross the Jordan thus became a symbol of the fact that the Law by itself could not save Israel or the world. It had to be Joshua, which literally means Savior, and is the Hebrew form of the Greek word Jesus, who leads the people across the Jordan and into the promised land, thus symbolizing the saving action of the new Joshua, Jesus the messianic Savior, in the covenant of grace. . . .

The river Jordan was also parted by the passage of Elijah and Elisha, an event also recalled at the liturgy of Epiphany (2 Kings 2). And it was from the Jordan that Elijah was taken up into heaven in order to return again, as the tradition developed, to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah (See Matt. 17:9-13). It was also in the Jordan that Naaman the Syrian was cleansed from his leprosy, a sign referred to by Jesus as a prefiguration of the salvation of all people, not only those of Israel (Lk 4:27). In the account of Naaman's cure the special significance of the Jordan is stressed once again (2 Kings 5:10-14). . . .

Can we not be washed in just any river and be clean? God's answer is, No. Only in the Jordan, in the baptism of Christ, are we cleansed from all of our sins. Only through the Jordan do we enter into the land of the living, the promised land of God's kingdom. Only by the sanctified waters of the Jordan does God sanctify us forever.⁶⁸

The Water of Life

Water has been used as a symbol for Jesus. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14).

The Prophet Jeremiah wrote, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters,

and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13).

The Prophet Jeremiah could not have been more contemporary. The world today has indeed forsaken the fountain and is trying to satisfy its thirst by drinking from the many broken cisterns.

Let us look briefly at man’s deep spiritual thirst today.

A Deeper Thirst

Once our physical needs are met, our spiritual thirst remains. We thirst for knowledge. We thirst for the ultimate concerns of life. We thirst for meaning. We thirst to know why the world was created. We thirst to know who we are. We thirst to know our purpose in life. We thirst to know God. We thirst to know if there is an existence beyond death. If we do not in some way answer these questions, the inner thirst grows painful like actual physical thirst. It makes us desperate. It causes suffering and agony. This painful thirst of the soul is what causes a great deal of the dreadful anxiety that exists in the world today.

King Tantalus

In Greek mythology, King Tantalus was punished in the underworld by being chained in a lake. Its water reached to his chin but withdrew whenever he bent down to satisfy his burning thirst. Over his head were branches laden with choice fruit, but they immediately drew back whenever he reached up to satisfy his hunger. A symbol of utter frustration, his name is immortalized in the English word “tantalize.” So, too, seeking to satisfy the inner thirst of the soul apart from Christ is tantalizing, utterly futile.

Everything in this world that we use to try to satisfy the thirst of the soul—money, lust, drugs, possessions, fame—is like a broken cistern. It cannot hold the water that is poured into it. And the thirst only grows worse as a result. One would think that these broken cisterns would drive us to the fountain of living waters. But it doesn’t happen, because we allow ourselves to be satisfied with those broken cisterns. We need to pray that the Lord not allow us to be satisfied with the tantalizing things of this world that serve only to increase our thirst. “Anyone who drinks of this water will thirst again,” said Jesus.

We need to pray that the Lord create a new thirst in us for the real water of life. The old saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink." That is our great problem as priests and preachers of the Church. We try to lead God's people to the water of life, but we cannot make them drink. We cannot create a thirst in them for the water of life. Only God can. We offer them the water of life, and they continue to drink from the broken cisterns of sin. We offer them the clear, crystal, thirst-quenching water of Jesus, and they continue to slake their thirst in the pig pens of the world. We offer them the pure water of Jesus, and they continue trying to satisfy their thirst in the polluted waters of sin.

Nothing will satisfy the burning thirst of tormented souls but to take them to the fountain of living waters, to true fellowship with Christ. ". . . whoever drinks of the water I shall give him will never thirst again," said Jesus, "but the water I shall give him will become a well of water within him that bubbles up to eternal life" (Jn. 4:12). "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters" (Isaiah 55:1). To make clear where these life-giving waters are to be found, Jesus says, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." The water of life, of which if anyone drink, he shall never thirst again, flows from Jesus at the very throne of God: "Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb . . ." (Rev. 22:1).

Christ came to make us not cisterns but artesian wells. Cisterns cannot stand drought and rainless months, but an artesian well can endure any drought, even parched fields and empty reservoirs, because it has within its own spring that wells up with an endless source of refreshment.

Here then is the true meaning of the holy water we receive every year on Epiphany. It should remind us of Jesus Who is the water of life, Who alone is able to satisfy the deepest thirst of the soul. But the important question is: Is Jesus the Fountain of Living waters for you? Do you come to Him regularly through prayer, through the reading of the Bible, through participation in the Eucharist to let Him satisfy the deep thirst of your soul for meaning and for fellowship with God? Or are you satisfied with quenching your thirst in the broken, brackish cisterns of this world that can hold no water but serve only to increase your thirst?

Jesus said,

“If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38).

An artesian well within each believer!

*Holy Water: A Symbol of Nature
Set Free From Sin*

It is Jesus—the Water of Life—Who blessed the waters of the earth when He stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized. As Bishop Kallistos Ware writes:

“When Christ went down into the waters, not only did He carry us down with Him and make us clean, but He also made clean the nature of the waters themselves. As the troparion of the forefeast puts it, ‘Christ has appeared in the Jordan to sanctify the waters.’ The feast of Theophany has thus a cosmic aspect. The fall of the angelic orders, and after it the fall of man, involved the whole universe. All God’s creation was thereby warped and disfigured: to use the symbolism of the liturgical texts, the waters were made a ‘lair of dragons.’ Christ came on earth to redeem not only man, but—through man—the entire material creation. When He entered the water, besides effecting by anticipation our rebirth in the font, he likewise effected the cleansing of the waters, their transfiguration into an organ of healing and grace.”⁶⁹

Thus, by her consecration of the waters, the Church frees water from the dark and evil powers that reside in it. Holy water becomes the symbol of nature set free from sin and consecrated by the Holy Spirit to our blessing and the blessing of our homes.

The Biblical Theme of Water

A monk of the Eastern Church writes concerning Jesus and water:

“One of the favourite themes of primitive Christian art is Moses striking the rock with his rod and

causing water to gush out. The water-theme comes over and over again in the Old Testament, from the crossing of the Red Sea by Israel, to Isaiah's call: 'Ho, everyone that thirstest, come ye to the waters . . .' (Isa. 55:1). The fulfillment of these passages of Scripture is to be found in the words of Our Lord reported in the Gospel: 'Except a man be born of Water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God (John 3:5); if any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me . . . out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water' (John 7, 37, 38).

*Water has become the sign of salvation. Our Lord commanded His disciples to baptize: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all the nations, baptizing them . . .' (Matt. 28:19). He Himself inaugurated His public ministry by receiving the baptism of John. Eastern Fathers, chiefly St. Ignatius of Antioch, teach that the contact of our Lord's body with the water of Jordan is the principle of the sanctifying action of water in the holy mystery' of Baptism.'*⁷⁰

Water and the Eucharist

St. Ambrose compared the water that flowed from the rock in the Old Testament to the Eucharist in the New Testament: "The water flowed from the Rock for the Jews, the Blood of Christ (flows) for you; the water slaked their thirst for an hour, the Blood quenches your thirst forever. The Jews drank and thirsted once more; when you have drunk, you need never thirst again. That (the water from the rock) was a figure; this (the Eucharist) is the truth. If the figure seems wonderful to you, how much more the reality the figure of which you admire" (De Myst. 48; Botte, 123).

Fr. Lev Gillet continues the analogy between water and the Eucharist when he writes, "Water that purifies cannot be thought of apart from Thy Blood. The Blood shed for us, for me. . . . Blood and water poured out together from the side which was pierced by the spear. And thus the mystery of water leads us into the mystery of Blood. The water of Jordan mingles with the Blood of Calvary" (In Thy Presence.' SVS Press. Crestwood, NY. p. 87).

The Supernatural Rock: Christ

St. Paul writes about the Rock that yielded water in the wilderness: "I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (I Cor. 10:1-4). May we drink of this Rock often. For it continues to flow to this day, bringing to us the very presence of Him Who is the Water of Life.

The First and the Second Creation

Just as the Spirit descended upon the waters in the beginning and produced the first creation, so at the moment Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and hovered over the waters to bring forth from them the second creation, man and woman renewed after the image of their Creator. In this second creation the baptized person is born anew in the waters consecrated by the epiclesis. The result is a new creation and a renewal of the first creation.

The Church Fathers on Water

Concerning the blessing of the water, Theodore of Mopsuestia writes, "First of all the Bishop, according to the law of the pontifical service, should use the prescribed words and ask of God that the grace of the Holy Spirit should come on the water and make it capable of this awe-inspiring birth" (XIV. 9). Cyril of Jerusalem writes, "Ordinary water, by the invocation of the Holy Spirit, of the Son, and of the Father, acquires a sanctifying power" (XXXIII, 429 A). Ambrose adds, "You have seen the water, but all water does not heal; that water heals which has the grace of Christ. The water is the instrument, but it is the Holy Spirit Who acts. The water does not heal, if the Spirit does not descend to consecrate it" (De Sacr. 1, 15; Botte 58-59).

Water From the Baptismal Pools

Following the baptismal services that took place on the Feast of the Epiphany in the Early Church, the faithful began taking

home some of the water from the baptismal pools, treasuring it for its consecrating and healing powers. St. John Chrysostom wrote about this practice: "On this occasion of the commemoration of the baptism of the Savior on which He sanctified the nature of the water, the people on leaving the church after midnight used to take home some of the water and keep it. It was noticed that this water stays pure and placid for two or three years" (Hom. 24. De Bapt. Christ).

The custom prevailed in the East not only of consecrating water in churches on Epiphany, but also of blessing a nearby river or fountain in honor of Christ's baptism. In Palestine it was the Jordan River that received this blessing in a colorful and solemn ceremony. Thousands of pilgrims would gather on its shores to step into the water after the blessing, submerging three times as they renewed their baptismal vows.

Fr. Alkiviades Calivas notes that, "In earlier times Churches had a fountain in their courtyard. The water contained in the fountain was usually blessed. The faithful were accustomed to drawing water from the fountain and to use it for purposes of sanctification and/or for symbolic washings before they entered the Church. One such famous fountain was the Font of the Church of Holy Wisdom (St. Sophia) in Constantinople, with its unique inscription which in Greek read the same forward and backward (Wash your sins — not only your face). The Services of Agiasmos (Blessing of Water) were usually conducted at these fonts. This custom is still prevalent in monastic communities."

Explanation of the Service

On the Feast of Epiphany, the Church calls us to go to the river Jordan to witness the manifestation of God and the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. There we see, with the eyes of our soul, our Lord immersing Himself once again in the waters of the River Jordan, and thus sanctifying the oceans, rivers and lakes of the world.

On the Feast of Epiphany the priest performs the special Rite of the Blessing of the Waters. He asks our Lord that just as 2,000 years ago He blessed the water in the Jordan River, so today He bless the water that we have before us so that in the words of the prayer: "*those who sprinkle and partake thereof (of the Holy*

Water) may receive it for the cleansing of souls and bodies, for the healing of suffering, for the sanctification of homes, and for every need.' Upon leaving church we take a container of holy water home to bless ourselves and our homes. "Today the streams of Jordan are changed into healing waters by the presence of the Lord," says the prayer of Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem, recited in the Rite of the Blessing of Waters on Epiphany.

The sprinkling of the people with holy water which takes place during this service has its roots in ancient practices of baptism where it was customary to sprinkle the faithful with the consecrated waters of the baptismal font before the catechumens were baptized.

In some parts of the country an Orthodox bishop throws a cross into a body of water to be retrieved by a swimmer. In the local parish the priest immerses a cross into a vessel containing water. He immerses it three times to recall the triple immersion of Christ in the Jordan, as well as the triple immersion of every Orthodox believer in the baptismal font. This act represents our Lord immersing Himself once again in the River Jordan and sanctifying the rivers and lakes of the world. Thus the consecrated water brings to us the healing presence of the Lord.

Children should be encouraged to keep the small container of holy water which they receive on this day. They can place it by their personal icon and use it the year round. They can use it to bless themselves or their room or their new bicycle, or pet, etc. They can partake of it when they feel they have a special need for the Lord's presence at home. It will represent the Lord's healing and loving presence with them constantly as does the family icon. Thus we can teach our children to keep Epiphany the year round.

Epiphany or Theophany

The meaning of Epiphany is expressed by the word *epiphany* itself which means in Greek the SHOWING FORTH or MANIFESTATION of God. The word THEOPHANY expresses it even better. It means the APPEARANCE of God. Christ's baptism in the Jordan River marks the manifestation of the Triune God to the world. For it was at the baptism of Jesus that God revealed Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity was made manifest: the Father testified from on high to the divine

Sonship of Jesus: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;" the Son received His Father's testimony; and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, descending from the Father and resting upon the Son. Thus, God revealed Himself fully on Epiphany as the Father Who loves us, the Son Who saves us, the Holy Spirit Who lives in us. As the troparion of the Feast says,

*"When Thou, O Lord was baptized in the Jordan,
The worship of the Trinity was made manifest.
For the voice of the Father bore witness unto Thee,
Calling Thee the beloved Son,
And the Spirit in the form of a dove
Confirmed His word as sure and steadfast.
O Christ our God, Who hast appeared and enlightened
the world,
Glory to Thee.*

Bishop Kallistos Ware emphasizes that the blessing of the waters on Epiphany "is effected not by the officiating priest and the people who are praying with him, but by Christ Himself, Who is the true celebrant in this as in all mysteries of the Church. It is the Christ who has blessed the waters once for all at His baptism in the Jordan: the liturgical ceremony of blessing is simply an extension of Christ's original act."⁷¹

Through the blessing of the waters the Church proclaims that the same Jesus Who sanctified the waters in the Jordan River is the One Who sanctifies the fallen world, transforming it into "the new heaven and the new earth" where creation will be "filled with the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). The purpose of the casting out of evil mentioned in the Epiphany prayers is that all may be transformed "in Christ." At Epiphany the new creation is inaugurated.

*From the Service
of the Blessing of Water*

The voice of the Lord cries over the waters saying: Come all ye receive the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of the fear of God, even Christ who is made manifest.

Today the nature of water is sanctified. Jordan is divided in two, and turns back the stream of its waters, beholding the Master being baptized.

As a man Thou didst come to that river, O Christ our King, and dost hasten O Good One, to receive the baptism of a servant at the hands of the Forerunner (John), because of our sins, O Lover of Man.

Following are three readings from the Prophecy of Isaiah concerning the messianic age. These are part of the Rite of the Blessing of Water:

Let the thirsty wilderness be glad, let the desert rejoice, let it blossom as a rose, let it blossom abundantly, let everything rejoice . . . (Isaiah 35:1-10).

Go to that water, O you who thirst, and as many as have no money, let them eat and drink without price, both wine and fat . . . (Isaiah 55:1-13).

With joy draw the water out of the wells of salvation. And in that day shall you say: Confess ye unto the Lord and call upon his Name; declare his glorious deeds . . . his Name is exalted . . . Hymn the Name of the Lord . . . Rejoice and exult . . . (Isaiah 12:3-6).

From St. Sophronius:

“Today the grace of the Holy Spirit hath descended on the waters in the likeness of a dove. Today hath shone the Sun that setteth not, and the world is lighted by the light of the Lord. Today the moon shineth with the world in its radiating beams. Today the shining stars adorn the universe with the splendour of their radiance. Today the clouds from heaven moisten mankind with showers of justice.

“Today the waters of the Jordan are changed to healing by the presence of the Lord. Today the whole universe is watered by mystical streams. Today the sins of mankind are blotted out by the waters of the Jordan. Today hath paradise been opened to mankind and the Sun of righteousness hath shone for us.

“Today we have escaped from darkness, and by the light of the knowledge of God we have been illuminated. Today the darkness of the world vanisheth with the appearance of our God. Today the whole creation is lighted from on high. Today we have been purchased for the Kingdom.

“Today the Lord cometh to baptism to elevate mankind above.

“Today the land and the sea have divided between them the joy of the world, and the world hath been filled with rejoicing.

“Today the streams of Jordan are changed into healing waters by the presence of the Lord. . . .

Elsewhere:

Therefore, O King and Lover of mankind, come and sanctify this water through the descent of your Holy Spirit. And confer upon it the grace of redemption, and the blessing of Jordan. Make it a font of incorruptibility, a gift of sanctification, a remission of sins, a healing of sickness, a destroyer of demons, render it inaccessible to the adverse powers, and make it full of the power of Angels, so that all who draw from it and partake of it may be blessed in their souls and bodies, healed of their sufferings, sanctified in their homes, and they may receive every befitting grace. . . . Grant sanctification, blessing, cleansing and health to all those who touch it, who sprinkle themselves with it or partake of it.”

“Come, then, King and Lover of mankind and sanctify this water through the descent of the Holy Spirit,” prays the priest.

The prayers of this beautiful rite of the blessing of water invoke the Holy Spirit repeatedly to descend upon the water, purify and sanctify it, and impart to it healing grace. The Great Synapte or Litany in this service includes twenty-six prayer requests in the following vein:

“that these waters may be sanctified by the power, operation and descent of the Holy Spirit.”

“that there may descend upon these waters the purifying action of the most substantial Trinity.”

“that this water may be endowed with the grace of redemption, the blessing of the Jordan, through the power, action and descent of the Holy Spirit.”

“that it may serve as a purification of the souls and bodies of all those who, with faith, shall draw and partake of it,” etc.

This last petition shows that the blest water offers healing grace and strength only to those who partake of it with faith; to those who come cleansed in spirit and stand ready to follow Christ as His co-workers in the world. Not all the holy water in the world will be of help to those who come passively, without faith.

“Lord, Wash Me!”

Fr. Lev Gillet in his inspiring devotional book “In His Presence” meditates on the meaning of water as follows: “Thou art not only the giver of water. Thou Thyself, Lord, art this living water. . . . Thou art the water that brings fertility to the arid and parched earth. At the beginning of the day, Thou art the dew which makes my soul able to bear leaves and fruit. . . . When Thou didst take it upon Thyself to wash the feet of Thy disciples and came to Simon Peter, who in humility protested, Thou didst answer him: ‘If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.’ Lord, my whole desire is to have a part with Thee. So, wash me. Wash me completely. I am not like Thy disciples who were already pure: as Thou didst say to them, it was from their feet only that the dust of the road had to be cleansed. Wash Thou my hands and my head. Wash my whole body. Bathe me. Give Thy spotlessness to all which in my thought, in my will, in my emotions, in my senses, needs purifying.”⁷²

Tears as Water

Continuing his meditation on water, Fr. Gillet speaks of water in the form of tears: “The grace of a second baptism—the baptism of repentance is also symbolized by water. But this time it is the water of tears. Thou didst abase Thyself in front of me, Lord, to wash my feet. And I, with Mary Magdalene, kneel before Thee and, in my turn, wash Thy feet. I wash them with the tears that I shed, or with the tears that I ask for. Have I any tears? Oh, give them to me! Break my heart! This baptism of burning tears, how powerful it is, for it can bring about repeatedly what the first baptism brought about once.”

A Renewal of Baptism

On Epiphany we are called to reaffirm our own baptism. For, there is a close connection between the baptism of Jesus on Epiphany and our baptism. As Bishop Kallistos Ware writes,

*‘In Christ’s baptism at the hands of John, our own baptismal regeneration is already accomplished by anticipation. The many celebrations of the Eucharist are all a participation in the single and unique Last Supper; and in a similar way all our individual baptisms are a sharing in the baptism of Christ—they are the means whereby the ‘grace of Jordan’ is extended, so that it may be appropriated by each one of us personally. As an indication of the close connection between Christ’s baptism and our baptism, it may be noted that the prayer at the Great Blessing of the Waters on Theophany is almost identical with the prayer of blessing said over the font at the sacrament of baptism.’*⁷³

Claim the Treasure

A news item told about an express package that reached an address in England from a South African town. The man who was to receive the box refused to pay the delivery charges. Consequently for about fourteen years that unclaimed box was used as a footstool in the express office. One day purely out of curiosity at an auction a man bid for it at a very low price. When he opened it later he was greatly astonished to find several thousand pounds of sterling in English bank notes. Because the original consignee had refused to pay the comparatively small delivery charges, he had missed receiving a small fortune.

People are often just that shortsighted. They deprive themselves of life’s richest blessings simply because they fail to claim them. We have within our reach the greatest blessing of all: adoption as sons and daughters of God, all of God’s care and protection and love, and life eternal in the presence of God. We have received these blessings through baptism. But many of us have yet to claim this treasure. We are using it as a footstool. We refuse to pay the delivery charges. We refuse to take time for God, to listen to His instructions, to study His word, to repent of our

sins, to seek His forgiveness, to receive Him with cleansed souls through the Eucharist, to walk in the light of His teaching in all that we do, to make Him our *real* and our *personal* Lord and Master in life. We refuse to pay a small price to receive a great gain. We are so wise in the things of the world and so ignorant in the things of the spirit. We thrill to the "big deal" we can make in business. But the greatest thing that can ever happen is when we come into possession of the riches of eternity through baptism and become joint heirs with Christ. It is this great treasure that the Church calls upon us to claim on the day of Epiphany by renewing our baptismal vows, by renouncing Satan and all of his works and accepting Christ as our Lord and Master.

Fr. Lev Gillet meditates on his reaffirmation of baptism on Epiphany when he writes:

*"The water runs over me, and I see Thee in the Jordan, Lord, being baptized by John. Thou didst desire to receive that baptism not for Thyself, but for the sake of men. Thou didst receive John's baptism for my sake. Thou didst desire in all our names, in my name, as our representative and in place of us, to take repentance upon Thyself. It was the only moment of Thy life when Thou didst wish to appear a repentant sinner. For they were our sins which Thou didst bring to the imperfect baptism of John, anticipating the perfect baptism. I unite myself to Thee, in this baptism that Thou didst receive for me. And especially I unite myself to Thee so that through the strength of my desire there may be a renewal of that other baptism which I received from Thy disciples in Thy name, in the name of Thy Father, in the name of Thy Spirit. Thou Thyself, through human hands, baptized me. And it was into Thee that I was baptized."*⁷⁴

The "Small and Great" Blessing

The Rite of the Blessing of Holy Water is celebrated on the Eve of the Feast as well as on the Feast Day itself. The first blessing was usually held in church and the second was often celebrated outdoors, on a lake or by a river or at the seashore. The custom of two blessings is explained by some to refer to the

practice in the Early Church of blessing the water for the baptism of the catechumens on the Eve of the Feast, whereas on the day of the Feast itself the water was blessed for the sanctification of the faithful.

The two rites of blessing on Epiphany Eve and Epiphany are identical, though some have tried to introduce a distinction between the two through ill-informed piety. Another service, entirely different, called the Small Blessing of Water is used at other times during the year: the first of August, the feast of a patron saint, the Feast of Mid-Pentecost, as well as on other occasions. In the tradition of the Church it is customary to perform the Small Blessing of Water on the first day of each month.

During the first millenium of the Church, the blessing of water took place only once on the Eve of Epiphany. In fact, the typicons of the Studite Monastery and of Jerusalem prescribe only one blessing of water "since Christ was baptized only once not twice." The custom of blessing water twice: on the Eve as well as on the Feast of Epiphany dates from the eleventh century. It became a general practice in the thirteenth century. The reason for the double blessing was that the blessing on the Eve of the feast was regarded as a remembrance of the early practice of baptizing the catechumens, whereas the blessing on the Feast Day itself was celebrated in memory of Christ's baptism in the Jordan river. That is why the first blessing of water took place generally in the narthex of the church where the catechumens were formerly baptized, whereas the second blessing on Epiphany took place outside the sanctuary at some river, stream or well.

— *Holy Water Kept at Home the Year Round* —

It is customary to take holy water home and preserve it for use from time to time. St. John Chrysostom alluded to this practice when he wrote, "The faithful take water home and keep it throughout the year." Some bless themselves with it after confession, crossing their foreheads with it as a physical expression that the Master has cleansed His soiled disciple. Others bless themselves with it each morning. In the words of Fr. Lev Gillet: "When, each morning and during the day, I let water run over me, I can at the same time be washed, in spirit, by the water . . . of the Savior . . . Lord, behold, the water runs over me. I remember my

sins. From my heart the words of the psalmist rise toward Thee: 'Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . .' And I seem to hear Thy answer. . . . 'Come now . . . though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow. . . .' Oh, might I receive this assurance of salvation each morning, when I first wash myself."⁷⁵ Others keep the holy water at home in order to partake of it in time of illness or other personal or family needs.

— *Christmas and Epiphany in the Early Church* —

Almost until the end of the fourth century, most churches celebrated the Birth of Christ and His Baptism on the same day. The Feast was called Epiphany. The rationale behind this was that both feasts manifested Christ's divinity to the world. The birth of the Son manifested the Word made flesh, while His Baptism revealed God in Trinity.

It was during the lifetime of St. John Chrysostom that the two celebrations were separated in order to enforce the unique concept of each. In fact, in one of his sermons preached on Christmas Eve in 386, he mentions that only a few years before, in his very lifetime, both feasts were celebrated together. Chrysostom mentions as one of the reasons for the separation of the two feasts the fact that during His Baptism, Jesus was manifest to everyone, whereas at His Birth, He appeared in a hidden form. He writes, "It is not the day when Christ was born that should be called Epiphany, but the day when He was baptized. Not through His birth did He become known to all, but through His Baptism. Before the day of Baptism, He was not known to the people" (Orat. XV). Ever since that time, Christmas has been observed on December 25 and Epiphany on January 6. Today it is only the Armenian Church in the East that continues to celebrate the Nativity and Epiphany together on January 6. In the Western Church Epiphany has as its main objective the adoration of the Magi. In the East, the adoration of the Magi is celebrated together with Christmas on December 25.

— *The Dove as a Symbol* —

Vladimir Lossky writes concerning the symbolism of the dove at the Baptism of Jesus: "The holy Fathers of the Church explain

the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at the Lord's Baptism by analogy with the Flood: just as then the world was purified of its iniquities by the waters of the Flood and the dove brought an olive branch into Noah's Ark, announcing the end of the Flood and peace returned upon the earth, so too now the Holy Spirit comes down in the form of a dove to announce the remission of sins and God's mercy to the world. 'There an olive branch, here the mercy of our God,' says St. John of Damascus.'⁷⁶

St. John Chrysostom said of the dove:

"Therefore the dove also appears not bearing an olive branch, but pointing out to us our Deliverer from all evils, and suggesting the gracious hopes. For not from out of an ark doth she lead one man only, but the whole world she leads up into heaven at her appearing, and instead of a branch of peace from an olive, she conveys the adoption to all the world's offspring in common."

We close with these beautiful words from the Rite of the Blessing of Water on Epiphany:

"Magnify, O my soul, one of the Trinity who bowed his head and received baptism.

Today the Master buries in the waters the sin of mortal man.

Today the Master has come to sanctify the nature of the waters.

At thine appearing in the body,

The earth was sanctified,

The waters blessed,

The heaven enlightened,

And mankind set free from the bitter tyranny of the enemy.

O marvellous gifts! O divine grace, Forbearance past speech!

For see, the Creator and Master now wears

My nature in the Jordan, yet without sin;

He cleanses me through water,

Illumines me through fire,

And makes me perfect through the Holy Spirit.

*The true Light has appeared,
And grants enlightenment to all.
Christ Who is above all purity is baptized with us;
He sanctifies the water
And it becomes a cleansing for our souls.
The outward sign is earthly,
The inward grace is higher than the heavens.
Salvation comes through washing,
And through water the Spirit:
Descending into the water we ascend to God.
Wonderful are thy works, O Lord: glory to thee.''*

