



Blessing of Water on the Feast of Theophany

The final day of the Christmas season and one of the greatest feasts of the Eastern Church is Theophany or Epiphany. In the Byzantine Ukrainian Catholic Church, we celebrate this feast on the eve of Theophany (January 5) and on January 6. A whole series of traditions practiced by Ukrainians for many centuries are linked with this major feast day. First and foremost among the traditions is the Solemn Blessing of Holy Water. Wherever circumstances permit, this solemn blessing of water takes place by a river, lake, or pond. However, if none of these are near, the liturgical rites of the blessing are held in church. This blessing commemorates our Lord's baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River when the Blessed Trinity was revealed to the people for the first time. As Jesus was standing in the water, the Holy Spirit in the appearance of a dove was seen above Him, while the voice of God the Father was heard to say, "This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased!"

During the ceremony the incensing of the water signifies the descent of the Holy Spirit. The three candles that are immersed and snuffed out in the water, remind us that through Christ's baptism our sins are destroyed and forgiven.

The many benefits we derive from holy water are suitably expressed in the inspiring prayers of the blessing itself. In these prayers, the priest asks God to endow the water with the power to sanctify us, to forgive sins, to cure the sick, to purify the souls and bodies of those who draw and drink this water, to alleviate their suffering, to sanctify their homes and to protect them from the incursions of the devil and from other afflictions.

It is for this reason that the faithful take this holy water home. It is fitting and right to have the home blessed by a priest or deacon. However, the head of the household can sprinkle all the rooms in the home as well as the surrounding yard. The remaining water is kept for future use.

Among its many uses, holy water may be used to bless oneself or others before undertaking a long journey, or we may bless our children with it before putting them to bed to protect them from possible harm. Sick people may drink some of the holy water or be sprinkled with it, humbly asking God for the grace of recovery. In times of grave temptation or family difficulties and afflictions, the use of holy water often brings strength and consolation.

It is evident, therefore, that in many events in our lives, holy water, as a sign of and petition for God's grace, can be very beneficial if taken and used with God's assistance.