

Holy Water:

What Does Bible Say About It And Its Consecration?

For both, he that sanctifies and they who are sanctified, are all of one

(Hebrews 2:11)

Holy Scripture does not say anything explicitly about consecration of water – just as it does not contain unequivocal answers to many other questions. Scripture is the God’s Word, and not a logbook that records the tiniest details of what happens on board of the Church ship. However, if there is something not explicitly stated in the Bible, does it mean that it has nothing to do with church life and must be avoided? The answer obviously is no, since Holy Writ is part of Holy Tradition, i.e. Scripture cannot hold all truth. The Apostle Paul emphasizes, *Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold to the Tradition, which ye have been taught, whether by word or our epistle.* (2 Thess. 2:15). Upon receiving a revelation from Christ, the apostle urges Christians from the city of Thessalonica to stand fast in the faith, and hold the Tradition that he taught them, whether by word (orally) or an epistle (i.e., letters of St. Paul, which made it eventually into the New Testament biblical Canon). Perhaps, if the Corinthians had asked Apostle Paul about the ritual of baptism, rather than speaking in tongues, we may have known more about the Apostolic Tradition of baptism, and therefore about the consecration of water; we would have the Scriptures to prove it. It must be noted that the *Great Consecration of Waters* is basically an element of the universal ritual of Baptism, held by early Christians on the feast day of Theophany.

Water is consecrated by praying to the Holy Spirit to descend onto the water and to sanctify it, as well as through the *Life-Giving Cross* of our Lord, which is dipped into the font by the priest three times. This ritual reminds us of the ancient Old Testament narrative when the bitter waters of Marah turned sweet and drinkable while Moses immersed a certain kind of wood into them, following a revelation from the Lord. The priest dips the holy cross into a font or a water reservoir to turn water into a source of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

We don’t know whether it was Jesus who ordered the apostles to consecrate water for the *Sacrament of Baptism*, before He ascended to his Father, *being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God* (Acts 1:3). It is also possible that the Church decided to do it at the behest of the Spirit of God who, as promised by the savior, *will guide you into all truth* (John 16:13) and *teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you* (John 14:26).

The Lord told Nicodemus, *Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God* (John 3:5). The Church of Christ hence

obediently baptizes everyone who comes to believe in the Messiah, in accordance with what she was taught by the holy apostles, the Lord's closest disciples. So why does the Church consecrate water?

The authoritative text of Didaché, which describes church life during the age of apostles and their immediate successors and hence dates back to the last third of the 1st century, already points out that Christian priests should use "living" (possibly running) water. The earliest mentioning of the consecration of water can be found in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries, which was the time when some original disciples of the holy apostles may have still been alive. Thus, Hieromartyr Irenaeus of Lyons († 202) writes that the baptism and purification of one's sins occurs *thanks to holy water and invocation of the Lord's name* (Iren. Fragm. Gr. 33 (32)). Although the water is referred to as holy, it doesn't actually prove that it was consecrated in any way. The fact that water was consecrated is proven by a statement of the younger contemporary of St. Irenaeus, the famous Tertullian, who wrote that water was invariably consecrated *as soon as God is called upon it* (Tertull. De bapt. 4), especially since the very element of water was made holy after the Baptism of the Lord in the Jordan.

There are numerous references of water consecration that appear in the works of the church fathers in the 4th century. In particular, Saint Basil the Great claims that consecration of water is an earliest oral Tradition of the Church (Basil. Magn. De Spirit. Sanct. 27). The rites of consecration and corresponding prayers are finally put to writing.

Here is an excerpt of texts from the rite of consecration of water, inspired by biblical images and attitude to the matter, the man and God.

Great Litany:

- That these waters may be sanctified by the power, effectual operation and descent of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord.

There is no magic in the Church. That is why water is consecrated by a heartfelt invocation of the Holy Spirit, rather than some magic spell:

- That there may descent upon these waters the cleansing operation of the consubstantial Trinity, let us pray to the Lord.

We pray for the Holy Trinity to cleanse the water because only God who created water can do it:

- That He will illumine us with the light of understanding and of piety through the descent of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord.

We ask God to consecrate water not for the sake of itself but for the sake of our illumination and reinforcement of faith:

- **That the Lord God will send down the blessing of Jordan and sanctify these waters, let us pray to the Lord.**

Jesus Christ sanctified and blessed the waters of the Jordan River by his baptism. Therefore, we pray for that blessing to pass on to our waters, our water reservoirs, our rivers and streams:

- **That it may be for the purification of the souls and bodies of all those who with faith shall draw and partake of it, let us pray to the Lord.**

Everything depends on faith. Holy water can purify our souls and bodies only if we partake of it with faith and believe in God's omnipotence and his healing power. *Ask, and it shall be given to you (Matthew 7:7), and all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing ye shall receive (Matthew 21:22):*

These are just a few examples of the treasure of prayer and theology stored in the holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church. Even though Holy Scripture does not contain any direct references to consecration of water, it does not contradict the biblical truth, the biblical revelation regarding God, the world and man. On the contrary, this ritual supports that revelation. That is the Bible made manifest in the Church and rendered as prayer and worship.