

Do holy water, blessings, and other sacramentals still have value?

We are witnessing today an indifference or contempt for sacramentals. Blessings on people, water, religious images, and their use, like other sacramentals, no longer have value in the eyes of many Christians today. Surely this attitude has something to do with abuses or superstitions that have distorted their true meaning. But it cannot be denied that there is also great ignorance about them. Let us try to shed some light on it.

Originally, sacramentals (also called little sacraments) were simple ceremonies that accompanied the celebration of the seven sacraments, and also the pious works and all the canonical prayer of the Church. Today, the notion of sacramentals is reserved for certain rites, instituted by the Church, that are not in themselves part of the celebration of the seven sacraments, but are similar in structure to the sacraments, and that the Church uses to obtain primarily spiritual effects through their intercession.

These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy (Catechism of the Catholic Church – CCC, 1667).

Sacramentals are instituted for the sanctification of certain ministries of the Church, certain states of life, a great variety of circumstances in Christian life, and the use of many things helpful to man. In accordance with bishops' pastoral decisions, they can also respond to the needs, culture, and special history of the Christian people of a

particular region or time. They always include a prayer, often accompanied by a specific sign, such as the laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, or the sprinkling of holy water (CCC, 1668).

Sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church's prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it (CCC 1670).

They are first and foremost **blessings** of persons, of objects, of places.

Certain blessings have a lasting importance because they **consecrate** persons to God, or reserve objects and places for liturgical use. Among those blessings which are intended for persons – not to be confused with sacramental ordination – are the blessing of the abbot or abbess of a monastery, the consecration of virgins, the rite of religious profession and the blessing of certain ministries of the Church (readers, acolytes, catechists, etc.). the dedication or blessing of a church or an altar, the blessing of holy oils, vessels, and vestments, bells, etc., can be mentioned as examples of blessings that concern objects.

And they are also **exorcisms**. When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism (CCC 1671-1673).

They are established by the Church, and only the Apostolic See alone can establish new sacramentals, authentically interpret those already received, or abolish or change any of them. (Code of Canon Law – CCC, can. 1167, §1).

The sacramentals are presented in the *Roman Ritual* (especially in the Ritual of Blessings and the Ritual of Exorcisms), where the forms and rites for imparting them are collected, the careful observance of the rites and formulas approved by the Church being required (CDC, can. 1167, §2).

Their value lies primarily in the prayer of the Church (*opus operantis Ecclesiae*), but in order for them to produce their effect, living faith is required, because sacramentals do not act like sacraments *ex opere operato*, but *ex opere operantis*, that is, they are conditioned by the faith of the one receiving them. And this is where the low esteem of the sacramentals appears: when they are not received with faith, they produce no effects and this leads to the false opinion that they have no virtue.

In their use, one must avoid both a lack of reverence and respect (they are an intercession of the Church) and a superstitious or magical type of use. Sacramentals do not change the nature of the reality on which they act, but are an expression of belonging to God.

Blessed objects are not amulets (objects of various natures and forms to which superstition ascribes a protective virtue against illness or misfortune, a virtue that resides in the object itself), but are sacred signs that remind us that God is always near us with his grace.

To summarise, sacramentals consist immediately and firstly in a prayer of intercession that the Church addresses to God, and only secondly and mediately, that is, through this prayer of intercession by the Church, in a sanctification, inasmuch as the Church, by means of these rites, imparts from God the sanctification of persons or things.

Persons and things, without being made true instrumental causes of grace, nor being perfected and elevated in their natural qualities, nevertheless in consideration of the Church's intercessory prayer, are taken under the special divine protection or acceptance for the spiritual good of those who possess or use them with due dispositions, offering the opportunity to better work out their salvation.

Since they are consecrated things, that same acceptance of God also implies that He will give special graces to those who use

them with due dispositions of mind; and, in the case of consecrated persons, it implies in these persons a moral title before God to obtain in due time the graces of state necessary to fulfil the duties entailed by that permanent consecration.

It is believed that in the sacramentals the Church immediately asks for and obtains actual graces for the person to whom she imparts them, such as contrition of sins, acts of faith, of hope, of charity, which are dispositions favourable to the good use of the sacraments or acts of perfect charity. To the use of the sacraments and acts of perfect charity it is believed that God has reserved the sanctifying grace or its increase to be given immediately (Cipriano Vagaggini, *Il senso teologico della liturgia*).

These are some explanations that attempt to shed some light on the sacramentals. However, confirmation of their value comes, as always, from the saints.

St John Bosco used them a great deal, and it is enough here to mention just one of them, holy water, which he also wanted his boys to use.

In his Regulations of the Oratory he recommended to the boys that “... *He shall see that each one enters the church in an orderly manner, blesses himself devoutly with holy water, and genuflects before the Blessed Sacrament.*” (BM III, 443).

And not only in the church did he request the use of holy water, but also in the dormitories and study rooms:

“*The dormitory was regarded as somewhat sacred. Don Bosco had prescribed that at its entrance (and later also in every study hall) there should be a small holy water font.*” (BM IV, 235).

He instilled the efficacy of holy water whenever he could. He told his young people in a good night:

“*There is in St. Peter’s a really beautiful holy water stoup whose bowl is supported by a marble ensemble*

symbolizing temptation. A long-tailed and horned frightening devil is pursuing a boy. The youngster, seeing himself about to fall prey to that ugly beast, reaches in panic into the holy water font. Dismayed, the devil no longer dares to seize him.

Holy water, my dear boys, is good for chasing away temptations. Don't we say about a fast runner, "He runs like the devil from holy water"? When tempted, and especially when entering a church, make the Sign of the Cross well, because it is there that the devil is waiting for you to make you lose the fruit of prayer. The simple Sign of the Cross repels him momentarily, but when joined to holy water it keeps him away for a long time.

One day St. Teresa was tempted. At every assault she made the Sign of the Cross, but within a few minutes she would feel tempted again. Annoyed by this, she sprinkled holy water on herself, and the devil had to beat a hasty retreat" (BM VIII, 316).

St John Bosco always held the sacramentals in high esteem. His own simple blessing was much sought after by people because it produced truly miraculous effects. One would have to draw up a list too long to recall how many spiritual and bodily healings his blessings received in faith produced. It is enough to read his life for this.