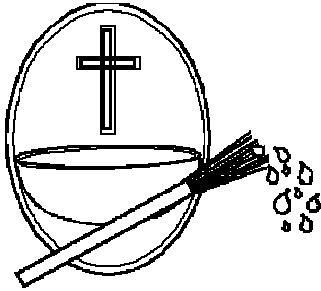


Signs & Symbols: Holy Water



Last month we looked at stoops by the entrance to the church, so this month let's think about the Holy water that is within them.

Many thousands of people have experienced Holy water at Lourdes, in France, where St Bernadette was told by the Immaculate Conception to scratch the ground and a stream broke from the ground. It still flows today, and you can bathe in the waters as well as fill containers to bring away from the many standpipes that have been placed for this purpose.

However the amount of water from Holy places one can transport home is limited and so normally the water in the stoop is Holy because it has been blessed for this purpose by a priest. It usually also contains a small amount of salt.

Why does the Church use salt in holy water? Firstly, probably because that's the way the Jews had done it to begin with. But secondly, because of the symbolical meaning of salt. Just as water is used for cleansing and for quenching fire, so salt is used to preserve from decay. Therefore the Church combines them to express the various reasons why it is used - to help to wash away the stains of sin, to quench the fire of our passions, to preserve us from relapses into sin.

Moreover, salt is regarded as a symbol of wisdom. Our Lord called His Apostles "the salt of the earth," because by them the knowledge of the Gospel was to be spread over the world. The custom of using salt is a very ancient one, and is traced by some to the second or third century.

To use the Holy water from the stoop, just dip in the tips of one or two fingers and then make the sign of the cross over yourself. Or you can just sign a cross on your forehead. As you do so it is customary to say the words, 'In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'.

Somewhere in England there is a palindrome (a word or phrase that reads the same back as well as forwards, e.g. Hannah) in Greek letters carved in the stone around a stoop. Translated into English it read, 'Wash my sins and not just my hands.'

This month

If you could carve a few words around a Holy water stoop, what would they be?

*by The Rev Dr Jo White
a vicar in Derbyshire*

**Hardening of the heart ages people more quickly
than hardening of the arteries.**

Anon