

Signs & Symbols: Stoop



The recent funeral of Pope John Paul II moved hundreds of millions of people worldwide when it was shown on TV. Especially moving for many was the symbolism within the service. Towards the very end one reporter commented that it was the sight of the droplets of sprinkled water on the simple coffin that would stay with him; and for many that was a very powerful symbol.

It makes one think of one of the key differences that one meets when entering a Roman Catholic, an Anglo-Catholic Protestant, or an Orthodox Church: the stoop.

The stoop is an open container that holds holy water which is normally attached to, or set into, the walls either on the right or on both sides of the entrance to the church. Entrants touch a thumb or finger of one hand, normally their right, into the water and then make the sign of the cross over themselves.

Having water at the entrance to a religious building is not unique to Christianity. Muslims are required to wash their hands, face, genitals and feet before entering the mosque for worship. Among the Jews a ceremony of purification was required before entering the Temple to assist at the sacrifices, and this undoubtedly suggested the practice of using holy water at the Christian church door. It is said to have been in vogue as early as the second century.

In the earliest churches those customs were carried through with a fountain for washing at the entrance, like at the Jewish Temple. In later years a clerk sprinkled the faithful with water as they came in and, for this reason, was called hydrokometes or "introducer by water".

In the Middle Ages it was customary to use holy water from the stoop when entering the church, but not when leaving it -- the idea being that purification was necessary before entering the house of God, but that after assisting at the Holy Sacrifice it was no longer needed. However, the general practice today is to take it both on entering and departing.

This month

As you enter the church, whether it has a stoop or not, think about how you are accepted in the family of God; be reminded of the water of your baptism and the vows that you made or were made for you. What do they mean to you today?

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To be secure in Jesus is to be radically insecure in the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer