

WHY THE PRIEST BLESSES OUR HOUSE ONCE A YEAR WITH HOLY WATER

Water is essential for life. In the “mystery of water” in the Orthodox Church, it is “through water that the demonic powers and elements in the world are killed and annihilated” (Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water & the Spirit*). “Water is the principle of purification, of cleanliness, and therefore of regeneration and renewal. It washes away stains, it re-creates the pristine purity of the earth” (Schmemmann, et al). When we descend into the baptismal font, we die and are buried with the Lord. When we emerge from the waters of the font, we rise with the Lord as He rose from the dead. Having been washed and cleansed in the baptismal waters, we are newly created and re-born with Christ as members of the Holy Church. Once a year we celebrate Theophany, the Baptism of the Lord. A special “great blessing of water” takes place on this feast day. The prayers for the blessing of the water are similar to the prayers used when water is blessed for the mystery of Holy Baptism. Exorcism prayers are read, and all demons, dark and unclean spirits are cast out of the water. Prayers are read that the Holy Spirit would descend into and sanctify the water. This holy water is used by the priest to bless icons, crosses and all the holy objects in the church. The food on Pascha is blessed with holy water, and there is even a prayer to use holy water to bless our automobiles. The priest blesses the faithful with holy water as well. We drink the holy water for a blessing and for our health, spiritual and physical. It is the pious tradition that the faithful fill a bottle with holy water and bring it home, keeping it in their icon corner. Some people drink holy water and/ or bless themselves with the holy water daily. It is recommended for use when we are ill, or when we are especially oppressed by a difficult temptation or difficulty in our life. Holy water burns the demons and casts them from our presence and from our homes. Christians are engaged in a daily spiritual warfare with the the dark forces of evil. Holy water is one weapon given to us by God to aid us in this noble struggle. The priest comes once a year to bless our homes with holy water as we yearly renew our commitment to struggle against evil and sin. Having the priest visit our home is a visible connection between “church” where we assemble and pray with our fellow Christians, and our home as the “little church”, as an extension and part of the universal Church. This annual visitation by the priest is part of the yearly cycle of events in our lives. To ask “Why does the priest need to bless my home every year?” is like asking “Why do I need to pray every day, or “Why do I need to go to church every Sunday?”, or “Why do I need to receive Holy Communion frequently?” Another question asked is “Why does the priest need to come to to bless my house? Why can’t I just sprinkle the holy water myself and bless the house myself? Isn’t it the same thing?” Certainly we can and should use the holy water at home. This has already been mentioned. This is a good thing and it is encouraged that we do this. In order to answer the question, however, of why the priest should visit our home, let’s take a look at the priesthood itself and what it means. When our Lord Jesus Christ appeared on the earth as a man, no one recognized Him and who He was. He had the simple appearance of any other ordinary man. Even His own disciples did not fully understand or recognize the nature of our Lord until after the Crucifixion and the Resurrection when they finally realized that their teacher was no ordinary man at all. He was the Son of God. The priest is also no ordinary man. When the candidate for priesthood is ordained, the Bishop lays his hands upon the candidate’s head, and prays that the Holy Spirit will descend upon him, filling him with special gifts, graces and blessings possessed by no other man. After ordination the priest might visibly still seem to be no different than anyone else, but in reality he has gone through an extraordinary change by the gift and grace of God. St. John Chrysostom says that “all the powers of Heaven are given unto the priest.” Only the priest has the authority and grace to invoke the Holy Spirit and offer bread and wine as the true and real Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. St. John says that this is the most awesome and greatest thing that we can do on this earth. Even the angels cannot do this. Only the priest has the grace and authority to read the prayer of absolution and wash away all the sins confessed by the penitent in the mystery of Holy Confession. The keys of Heaven are given to the Apostles and the Lord breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. The Lord, after His Ascension, passes the

baton to His priests to continue the work of the salvation of mankind. These are just some examples. The priest has many graces and gifts. The priest as a man is a sinner like us and struggles for his salvation the same as we do. However, the *priesthood* is Christ Himself, and when we respect the priest, when we receive a blessing from a priest, when we kiss the hand of a priest, it is more than a man's hand that we are kissing. In reality, it is the hand of Christ that we kiss because of the gift of the priesthood that dwells within this man. The priest knows and understands that the respect given unto him is not rendered to him personally or because of any merit of his own. The priest is painfully aware of his own shortcomings, sins and unworthiness. The priest understands very well that the respect shown to him is because of Who and what he represents and **is** as the minister and servant of our Lord. Therefore, there is a huge difference when we sprinkle holy water in our homes (if we even do that at all) and when the priest comes and sprinkles the holy water in our homes. Whenever our Savior visited the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany, he was shown great love and respect. What a blessing and joy it is to have a priest, even if only once a year, visit us and come beneath the roof of our homes and bless our homes.