

ROMAN MISSAL

THIRD EDITION

Water, Fonts, and Lent

Lent, its Forty Days, and Baptism. Does the *Roman Missal, Third Edition* provide any changes, any guidance on what to do with baptismal water in the baptismal font and holy water in the smaller fonts and stoops? Is the liturgical environment affected in any new or different way?

Four-part response. The issue seems complex. It concerns the liturgy of the Church, what is suitable adaptation, what is “liked and not liked”, and what parish ministers can and should do.

1. How did emptying baptismal and holy water fonts in Lent get started?

Pre-Vatican II history. Prior to the reforms of Vatican Council II, baptismal fonts with locked covers were located behind locked doors or gates. Because the Church wanted the church building open (still true today) for all kinds of visits and prayer, important things were locked up: the reserved Eucharist, the holy oils, and the baptismal water. This water was blessed only once a year during the Easter Vigil and it had to last twelve months. The sacristy, as well as certain cupboards and the sacrarium (sink for disposing holy things) within it, had additional locks. The guide: protect the holy things and let the people use the church!

Vatican II reform. Baptismal water no longer has to last from Easter Vigil to Easter Vigil. It is to be blessed as needed so that it is always fresh and living and abundant. It is an important symbol that can speak big realities when used in big ways. In the prayer for the Blessing of Baptismal Water used during the Paschal Vigil, the *Sacramentary*, both the first and the second editions, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, as well as the *Roman Missal, Third Edition* contains this phrase: “unseal for her [the Church] the fountain of Baptism”.



The Mass and Its Parts – Navigating the *Roman Missal*

The pastoral effectiveness of a celebration will be greatly increased if the texts of the readings, the prayers, and the liturgical chants correspond as aptly as possible to the needs, the preparation, and the culture of the participants. GIRM, no. 352.

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A liturgical adaptation gone awry. This new line in the ritual text prompted pastoral thinking – not all at once but over time – perhaps along these lines.

- a. “The font, then, is sealed prior to this prayer if it is unsealed after it...”
- b. “Baptism on Sunday is strongly desired, even for infants; celebrating Baptism within Mass is even more preferred...”
- c. “The Sundays of Lent are now filled with the scrutinies of the elect and other prayers for those who will be baptized during the Easter Vigil after Lent is over...”
- d. “So let’s also defer Baptism of babies until Easter Time unless there is a serious need or emergency...”
- e. “And let’s seal the baptismal font and the holy water stoops...fasting from water, as it were...so that baptismal water, already a big thing for the Church, seems even bigger when we get to the ‘mother of all vigils’, the Easter Vigil.”

People thought, parishes acted, ideas were shared. Then recommendations of empty fonts, of covering fonts, etc. appeared in some commentaries and journals but never in official Church texts. The problem: the thinking did not go far enough.

2. Thinking liturgically and acting ritually.

The *Code of Canon Law* is silent on the issue of empty fonts. Water is cited in these places: canons 849 and 853 – washing with true water that is blessed according to the liturgical books is required in Baptism; canon 919, §1 – water does not break the Communion fast; and canon 924, §1 – water must be mixed with wine for Mass.

We fast in Lent, but not from sacramentals. Water should be abundantly available. Even in Lent.

What is the true character of Lent? The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* is the best place to start.

109. Lent is marked by two themes, the baptismal and the penitential. By recalling or preparing for baptism and by repentance, this season disposes the faithful, as they more diligently listen to the word of God and devote themselves to prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery. The baptismal and penitential aspects of Lent are to be given greater prominence both in the liturgy and by liturgical catechesis. Hence:

- a. More use is to be made of the baptismal features proper to the Lenten liturgy; some of those from an earlier era are to be restored as may seem advisable.
- b. The same is to apply to the penitential elements. As regards catechesis, it is important to impress on the minds of the faithful not only a social consequences of sin but also the essence of the virtue of penance, namely, detestation of sin as an offence against God; the role of the Church in penitential practices is not to be neglected and the people are to be exhorted to pray for sinners.

The oldest roots of Lent are in the already baptized faithful praying for and with the elect, those who will celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist – during the Easter Vigil. The already baptized see the change in the elect and in their lives, look at their own, and see the need to return, repent, renew – developing the secondary focus for Lent. Over time it became a primary focus, especially from Trent to Vatican II, because we “lost” the catechumenate.

Lent has a penitential focus. True. But first, Lent has a baptismal focus. The *Lectionary for Mass Year A* Gospels of the Samaritan Woman, the Man Born Blind, and the Raising of Lazarus must be used in that order with the three scrutinies on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. They may be used any year (see LM, nos. 29B, 30C ff.) because of their richness and the history of these Baptism images: water, light, death. That can mean the B and C texts might never be used.

The ritual books do not restrict, limit, or forbid the use of water in Lent.

- On Ash Wednesday, the Blessing of Ashes includes sprinkling with holy water.
- In the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, a Prayer over Blessed Water is part of the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion so that the already baptized may sign themselves with water when called by name.
- The Church still proclaims the Creed in Lent. The *Roman Missal, Third Edition* encourages the use of the Apostles' Creed in Lent and Easter Time (no longer restricted to Masses with children) because of its rich baptismal focus and history.
- At the beginning of the Funeral Liturgy, the Christian faithful meet the body at the door of the church. Baptism is recalled by the sprinkling with water and clothing with the pall.
- If a new church is dedicated on a Sunday or other day of Lent, the Mass of the Lenten day is omitted and the texts from the *Dedication of a Church and an Altar* are used. This includes a blessing of water for the sprinkling of the people and the walls of the church.
- On Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, the blessing of branches includes sprinkling with holy water.

A word about Penance. From the beginning, the Church views the Sacrament of Penance as a "second Baptism". It brings us back to the font where we were enlightened by and clothed in Christ. The Introduction to the *Rite of Penance*, nos. 1-2 remind us:

...[T]he Church has never failed to call people from sin to conversion and through the celebration of penance to show the victory of Christ over sin.

This victory is first brought to light in baptism where our fallen nature is crucified with Christ so that the body of sin may be destroyed and we may no longer be slaves to sin, but rise with Christ and live for God. For this reason the Church proclaims its faith in "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

...[The purpose of the sacrament of penance] is that the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God through the restoration of grace....

It is a way for the baptized Christian to be restored to the full dignity of Baptism.

Water should be abundantly available. Even in Lent.



3. Some further reading.

Here is some smart thinking on the issue. The first is from an official source but note to whom it is addressed (a single person) and who signed it (the undersecretary). Note, too, the Latin phrase *praeter legem*, "apart from the law" which means the practice is a matter of custom, not of law, but still has importance.

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments [CDWDS], Prot. N. 569/00/L of 14 March 2000, individual response to a question. A post on the Catholic Liturgical Library.

<http://www.catholicliturgy.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/Law/Index/index.cfm/FuseAction/LawText/Index/6/LawIndex/46>.

Diana Macalintal, Office of Worship, Diocese of San José, excerpt from "Removing Holy Water from the Baptismal Font during Lent".

"...removing water from the font or preventing the faithful from touching the water in the font would be detrimental to the sign of baptism that is a focus of Lent. The baptized remain a baptized people throughout all of Lent. We do not pretend to be unbaptized along with the catechumens, just as we do not pretend that Christ is not risen during Good Friday or Holy Saturday. Our Lenten practices should more explicitly emphasize our baptism so that we can recognize those areas in our lives when we are not living out the promises of that baptism. What the faithful should be hungering and thirsting for is not the symbol of their baptism but rather a world in which the faithful living out of that baptism is evident. For the catechumens, their hunger for baptism may even be heightened when there are full fonts of water, just as a person who fasts is more aware of their hunger when food is placed before them."

Diana Macalintal, "Water in the font during Lent". *TeamRCIA* post of 4 February 2009.

<http://teamrcia.com/2009/02/04/water-in-the-font-during-lent/>.

Nick Wagner, "Seven reasons you should never empty the baptismal font". *TeamRCIA* post of 26 December 2009.

<http://teamrcia.com/2009/12/26/seven-reasons-you-should-never-empty-the-baptismal-font/>.

4. Q&A based on the above information.

Question. Must the baptismal font and holy water fonts be emptied for Lent?

Answer. No.

Q. May they be emptied?

A. The law is silent. But custom and the ritual books are clear: the Church uses and therefore wants filled fonts. Even in Lent.

Q. But if a parish does not baptize during Lent, could the font be empty as a clear sign of fasting from Baptism?

A. No. This is not good, sound ritual practice.

Q. Is the font ever empty?

A. Yes. Not on Ash Wednesday but in the Paschal Triduum after the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper in preparation for the Easter Vigil.