

# Water is powerful symbol in faith life

As a young mother was entering church with her little boy, he asked: "Why is Holy Water poison?"

Being distracted at the time, she said that she couldn't talk right now. However, all during the Mass she was distracted thinking about his question. As they left church, she asked him: "What was that question you asked before?" He replied: "Why is holy water poison?" The mother replied: "Honey, holy water isn't poison!" The little boy replied: "You never see anyone drinking it, do you?"

It's been said that children are wonderful observers, but awful interpreters! In counseling and psychotherapy we often discover that we carried beliefs into adulthood about interpretations we made as children, and never questioned. Too many older Catholics carry guilt and fear from their past religious education. It's never too late to question our own thoughts and beliefs. It's never too late to release the thoughts and beliefs that have poisoned our relationship with God!

The little boy's question was a good one. Holy water likely would make us sick if we drank the water into which hundreds and thousands of fingers had dipped. Yet, the same water becomes a blessing when we sign ourselves with the cross in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Used in this way, holy water becomes a blessing for us and a poison for sin.

Water is a powerful symbol in our faith life. The waters of the Red Sea were salvation for the Israelites who passed through the waters, and "poison" for the Egyptians who were drowned in the water. In baptism, those entering the church are born again of water and the spirit, but the same water is a poison for sin, as sin and guilt are washed away. We sign ourselves with the cross and holy water as we physically "enter" the church, to both remind ourselves of that first entrance into the church. We are reminded that the cross, the symbol of death, --"poison" for the physical life of Jesus, becomes the source of eternal life for us.

Death, in a sense, renders all life meaningless. Why bother? I'll die, and you'll die, and everything we build one day will fade, and we will all be forgotten. Death challenges the meaning of life.

Resurrection, by contrast, makes all of life meaningful. This life is not the only life. Love is stronger than death. If memory of us will fade on earth, we will be in God's memory forever. And, yes, while every "thing" we build or do will return to ashes, what we do will have immortal value. Because of the events we celebrate in Lent and Holy Week, death has lost its sting. Death's poison now has an antidote because of God's love.

Allow me to share a story that a lady shared with me about her husband's death. He had been battling cancer for a long time, and one night she was awakened as he sat up in bed and appeared to be talking to someone. She asked him if he wanted more morphine and he answered yes. Then she asked him if he would like to pray. Again he said yes. They said the Our Father and three Hail Mary's and the Glory Be. He seemed to again be peaceful.

As she drifted back to sleep, she suddenly became aware that he was no longer in bed!. She looked and saw that he was kneeling next to the bed praying. He died in that position.

How many times had he signed himself with the cross? How many times had he said those prayers? In the face of death he knew what to do.

So the little boy was right. The holy water in which we are born again is indeed poison – for sin and for death. And the same waters become the living waters that bubble up to eternal life. The little boy with faith today will know how to face death on another day.