

Dusting the Water in the Font

My tradition believes in sacraments, that is, moments when God presence is made known through some physical element that is part of our worship. Two sacraments are of particular importance because they were instituted and sanctioned by Jesus during his earthly ministry: Baptism and Holy Communion. The water that is poured over a person at baptism (or better, into which they are immersed) and the bread and wine of communion are the outward and visible signs that God is with us, "Guaranteed!" as the late Cajun chef Justin Williams was fond of saying.

Because they are so important, wherever I have served I have tried to make the altar and the font visible together, and have suggested the same to congregations I have consulted with, wherever the architecture makes it possible.

Sometimes that takes some doing. A lot of traditional church buildings have fonts located near the front door. Baptism is seen as our "entry" into the church, as it were. In many cases, moving the font creates a large and unwieldy empty space that must be "repurposed." I was, therefore, grateful when I arrived at my present congregation to find the font already up in the front, though not front and center before the altar. I moved it – a couple of hundred pounds of marble in four pieces – just in time for my first baptism there about five months after I arrived.

At first, I simply let the font sit there empty, draining it after every use. A couple of months later, after a baptism, I watched as several people dipped their fingers in the blessed water and make the sign of the cross on their forehead, heart and shoulders on their way to the altar to receive communion.

From then on, I decided, we would have blessed water in the font at all times. When there were no baptisms, I would bless water especially for this use, adding some "exorcised" salt to purify it. "Theology follows praxis" and along with the allusions to the parable that Jesus told, it also served to keep nasty molds and slime from growing there! Because of the prayer involved, members of the altar guild left managing the water in the font to me. And sure enough, the number of people who took up the custom of crossing themselves on their way to communion increased pretty steadily.

I too would pause as I approached the altar to begin a service, and would reach into the font for water to bless myself.

One Sunday as I did this my fingers felt something odd. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and ... eww! What is that?"

Not slimy, but gritty. I looked into the font and saw that the water was covered with a fine layer of dust.

We keep the outer doors of the church open during the week to welcome visitors and those who need a place to pause and pray. Sometimes the inner doors get let open as well, and evidently that week we had enough traffic to result in dust on the water in the font. At the announcement time that service, I shared my experience in order to spare anyone else that “eww” moment.

No one at seminary taught me that you need, every once in a while, to dust the water in the font. What seminary did train me to do was write a decent sermon, teach decent adult education classes, and provide decent pastoral care, especially to those in a hospital. Looking back on many years of experience, that accounts for something around 35-40% of the time I have devoted to congregational ministry.

What I did not learn was how run a meeting, how to organize a community, how to diagnose physical plant problems, how to raise money, how to supervise an office and a staff, how to manage change, and – you’ll understand the distinction when you see it – how to preach effectively.

Every clergy person complains about what they were not taught in school, and many threaten to write the definitive book cataloging their experiences and especially the awful things they have encountered.

This is not that book!

Instead, it is a collection of observations and reflections on how I have encountered needs and situations unanticipated by my venerable seminary professors and where I found the skills and wisdom to meet them. This is not a collection of horror stories, but helpful stories, about things that have nudged me toward becoming a better pastor.

Some require time and training to master, like tracking demographic changes in your neighborhood and preparing for the next wave of visitors and newcomers. Some are dead simple, like taking two pieces of paper towel and gently floating them on the water in the font, then drawing them slowly into a waiting bowl for disposal. Don’t forget to add more water -- and more salt --afterward.