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Trinity Church, Glendalough, Ireland

Threshold Rites

People of the Door and of the Doorkeeper

BY R. GABRIEL PIVARNIK, OP

Crossing the threshold of a church symbolizes and implies much more than simply stepping through a doorway or portal into a reserved space for worship. In the early medieval liturgy for blessing (dedicating) a church, the faithful were not allowed to enter the new church building until it had been completely set apart as sacred—it would first have to be sprinkled with holy water inside and out three times and every vessel, linen, and object used for worship would be consecrated by the bishop.¹ Only after all of this had been done would the bishop return to the doorway of the church, where the people continued to pray litanies or lauds (morning prayer), and he would chrismate the door saying:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit may you be a gate blessed, consecrated, sanctified, given over and entrusted to the Lord God. May you be an entrance of salvation and peace. Gate, may you be a peaceful door through him who called himself the door and the doorkeeper, Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit.²

Once people had experienced all that, they knew that to walk through the doorway of a dedicated church is to recognize a distinct and profound change in reality—from the secular to the sacred, from death in sinfulness to life in the Gospel, from condemnation to salvation. But for many of us, crossing the threshold of our churches today is like going through any other door. We may bless ourselves with holy water on the way in and out, we may even lower our voices in respect for the sacredness of the space, but all too often that passage has become mundane and routine.

And yet our liturgical life is marked by threshold rituals that beg us to recall the clear distinction and difference of what happens as we cross through that doorway: the signing of the cross over catechumens at the rite of acceptance into the catechumenate, the ritual of welcoming in the rite of matrimony, the signing and naming of children for infant baptism, the sprinkling of holy water over the deceased as the funeral liturgy is begun, the rapping on

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the door by the bishop as the current rite of dedication of a church unfolds. In each of these threshold rites a new beginning is made—whether a would-be Christian is marked with the life-giving sign of Christ's cross, for example, or an engaged couple is greeted to mark their new distinction as a married couple within the life of the Church. These actions mark the participants as *changed* in their relationship to God and to the assembly.

Gathered by the Cross

What then is the significance of mitigating these ritual actions by either moving them from the doorway of the church or deleting them altogether? Do we tacitly admit to no distinction between what we do outside the worship space and what we do within it? Perhaps. Often, it is true, we move these rituals away from the doorway of the church so that the action can be more visible to the rest of the assembly which has gathered. Our rationale is often laudable—to increase the participation of those gathered

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for worship or to allow the rite to be transformative by its witness to more people. Indeed, parish communities have been deeply moved and affected by witnessing the rite of acceptance within the body of the church, by seeing adult men and women signed with the cross over their entire body again and again. It is a powerful ritual to behold. But, theologically speaking, it is perhaps even more powerful to affirm that no one is admitted to membership in the worshiping assembly until that person has been signed with the cross. One does not cross the threshold of the worship space until that symbol has been passed on by those who already believe—no child, no adult, no one.³ Would that not remind us more emphatically of how important our own baptism is? Would it not give us reason to pause every time we make the sign of the cross upon ourselves? And would it not make us think twice every time we ourselves step across the threshold to enter our assembly's worship space?

Crossing the threshold should remind us of why we have gathered in the first place—for the unfolding of the paschal mystery before us and for our salvation. In the rites of the Easter Vigil, there is a significant transition at the door of the church. The rite begins in the darkness outside with only the Easter fire offering light. With the preparation and blessing of the Paschal Candle, a deacon proclaims, "Christ, our Light!" and a single flame is brought to the doors of the church. There the invocation, "Christ, our Light!" is made again, and then—and only then—are the tapers of the community lit as they process through the entry way into the church. The meaning is clear: Despite the darkness of sin and death, those who gather as the people of God within the ecclesial building are swathed in light. In the midst of this grand celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the passage across the threshold of the church is one marked by stark contrast. To those outside there is darkness, but to the assembly within is given the Light which is Christ.

Personal Change

But that transition across the threshold also symbolizes a change in the person when a ritual is performed at the doors of the building. For infants receiving baptism, it is here at the entrance of the church that they are first named publicly to the community. The reception of the sign of the cross marks them for Christ and for the Church. They are named and signed in anticipation of both the baptism they will receive and the proper place they will assume in the ecclesial community. The rite of acceptance for catechumens is just as transformative. The signing of the candidates with the cross changes their status within the Church as they are accepted into the order of catechumens. While it is true that many of our present-day catechumens are completely familiar with our typical Sunday liturgies, imagine the impact of the invitation, "Come into the church, to share with us at the table of God's word,"⁴ if that familiarity has been kept from them. Even the welcoming rite of matrimony prefigures the changed status of the couple who have gathered friends and family to the church. There at the door they greet their loved ones and are greeted by the priest, who expresses the joy of the Church at their union. They cross the threshold into the church only as a man and a woman united in love, but at the end of the service they pass through that same threshold as a couple united in the love of Christ through the power of the sacrament which they have celebrated.

Perhaps more than anything else we do, crossing the threshold of our churches signifies an entry into a sacred time and space. In the current *Rite of Dedication of a Church*, the bishop announces the words of Psalm 24, "Go within his gates singing praise, enter his courts with songs of praise," and the people respond, "Lift high the ancient portals, the King of Glory enters."⁵ The words of the psalmist point to the eternal banquet in heaven and the presence of Christ not only in the Church as the Mystical Body but also in the church as sacred space. The entry-

way marks the courts of the Lord. This is, indeed, as the medieval rite states, the "gate of salvation and peace."

Crossing this threshold is a passage into the Paschal Mystery itself—a passage into the dying and rising of Christ. Those rites that take place at the threshold constantly remind of us of our journey to the eternal banquet in heaven—even the funeral liturgy alludes to this as the deceased's body is greeted at the door. As the body crosses the threshold, it is sprinkled with holy water, and the priest recites simply, "In the waters of baptism N. died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May he/she now share with him in glory."⁶ The final crossing of the believer marks the hope of resurrection into the heavenly kingdom for all eternity—a sacred space, a sacred time.

Passage to Hope

In all of our threshold rites, we signify this passage into the hope which the Paschal Mystery brings to us. By moving these rites away from their proper place at the entry of the church, we diminish not only their meaning and symbolic value but also their inherent ability to recall us to our own passages, our own crossings. The threshold of the church marks the new beginning for the believer, a division between secular and sacred, and a movement into eternal life and the rites that are accomplished there to *change* us that we might increase in faith, hope, and love—the faith of the newly baptized and the ecclesial community, the hope of those who have died in Christ, and the love of holy matrimony and the *agape* of the Church's Eucharist. Every time we pass through the doors of our churches, we enter through the narrow gate which is Christ, we cross the threshold into salvation.

Notes

1. *Ordo ad benedicendum ecclesiam* in Brian Repsher, *The Rite of Church Dedication in the Early Medieval Era* (Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 139–168. Repsher gives a complete translation of the entire rite in the appendix of this volume. For an explication of the rite see the same volume, 41–66.

2. *Ibid.*, 164.

3. This rule does not apply, of course, to inquirers or seekers, but what if it did? It certainly does apply to all those who by conscious choice (either their own or their parents, in the case of infants and young children) wish to belong to the worshipping community.

4. "Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens," §60, in *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 28.

5. "Dedication of a Church," §34, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church, Volume II* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 370. The recitation of this psalm upon entering has been maintained since the early medieval period.

6. "Funeral Rite," §160, in *Order of Christian Funerals* (Totowa, New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1999), 81.