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
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 wor­
ship 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
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 im­
portant 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?

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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,” 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.” 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.”

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

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 worshiping community.
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.