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8 MARZO 2020



by **Luigi Mariano Guzzo**\* ([https://doi.org/10.652EE821-F1F8-4A58-81BD-88F996C3CCD9#\\_ftn1](https://doi.org/10.652EE821-F1F8-4A58-81BD-88F996C3CCD9#_ftn1))

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The Covid-19 epidemic also changes our manner of being in church. Besides the need to respect the safety distance of at least one meter during religious services, in line with the government provisions, Calabrian bishops (and not only they) adopt further measures, ranging from the presence of a hydroalcoholic solution at the entrance of the places of worship to the warning requiring to wash one's hands well, especially directed at priests, deacons, and ministers of the Eucharist. Within a religious community, these hygienic-sanitary indications, acquire a spiritual significance, which can be traced back to the ancient practices of personal purification, associated with the element of water. In general, as a religious act, purification marks the passage from the profane to the sacred, but also from a life of sin, of flesh, to a new life, of spirit; from what is impure to what is pure... Water has an expiatory meaning that underlies the idea of a moral and at the same time spiritual regeneration. Jewish wisdom, through Psalm 26, makes one sing: "I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar." In the Christian revelation, water is itself a symbol of salvation: as John writes (19:34), blood and water flow out from the pierced side of Jesus after his death on the cross. Before the passion, during the last supper, it is Jesus again who indicates a new style, a ministry of service, by washing the feet of the apostles with water (Jn 13: 1-15).

It is interesting to observe that over the centuries the different practices of purification have also taken on health-related functions. In the sixth century, for example, Cassiodorus founds a monastic institution, the "Vivarium," on some coastal inlets washed by the Ionian Sea, and also uses these natural pools for therapeutic purposes. Even today, as it is well known, ablutions are performed by Muslims in preparation for prayer, according to the indications of the Koran: "O you who have believed, when you rise to [perform] prayer, wash your faces and your forearms to the elbows and wipe over your heads and wash your feet to the ankles. And if you are in a state of janabah, then purify yourselves" (Sura, 6). One may also think of the immersion in the sacred river Ganges prescribed to the Hindus.

Certainly, in Christianity, as health issues were progressively absorbed (and resolved) by the competences of the public authorities, ablutions became increasingly symbolic – starting with baptism, which is not, moreover, a baptism "with water" (as was that of John the Baptist) but in "Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3:20). In the Catholic liturgy there are other forms of purification – of people (the sprinkling of the faithful, or the washing of the priest's hands both after the prayer for the offerings and after the communion) and sacred objects (the purification of chalice and paten). These rites manifest the desire for a purification that is primarily interior. On the other hand, the Christian message goes beyond the simple ritualism of the gestures: the Pharisees and scribes marvel that Jesus' disciples "take food with impure hands, that is, unwashed" hands (Mk 7: 2). But the large baggage of information that is preserved in religious traditions teaches that the hygiene of the body is closely connected to the hygiene of the spirit, and *vice versa*. In the time of the Covid-19 epidemic, this is a lesson to be kept in mind.



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