

RELIGION, SCIENCE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

# THE ADRIATIC SEA

## A SEA AT RISK, A UNITY OF PURPOSE



Editors  
Neal Ascherson  
Andrew Marshall

## The Symbol of Water in the Biblical, Patristic and Liturgical Tradition

Cardinal Walter Kasper

### I.

We all think that we know what water is. Even those who have forgotten almost everything of their chemistry lessons still remember the chemical formula of water. For those of us who live in the West and the North of the earth our relationship to water has long been marked by carelessness and indifference. We needed first to learn that water is scarce in other parts of the world, and is therefore priceless. It is only now due to a newly developed sense of environmental awareness that we, enlightened “Westerners”, also recognise the dangers associated with water pollution and poisoning, and this has hastened an awakening of the concern for pure and clean water.

But no mountaineer – and I gladly admit to being one myself – is unfamiliar with the delight of spring water flowing from the rocks, and its delectable taste. In the mountains, one admires the beauty and mystery of clear mountain lakes, the power of thunderous torrents, and remains in awe of spring water mysteriously emerging from the depth. Almost spontaneously, one calls to mind St. Francis of Assisi’s Song of the Sun: “Praise be thine, Oh my Lord, through our sister the water, quite useful and humble and precious and pure”.

Romano Guardini, in his (in the past) much read booklet “*Of Holy Signs*”, took up those thoughts and showed that they can be understandable today, if one only is able to gaze and to reflect. He writes:

Mysterious is the water. Plain, clear, unselfish, ready, pure to wash what is soiled, to refresh what is thirsty. And at the same time unfathomable, restless, full of riddles and power; luring downwards. A true parable of the mysterious primary causes, from which life springs and death calls; a parable of life itself, seemingly so clear, yet so mysterious. (p. 27).

### II.

In the religious tradition of mankind this deeper symbolic signification is common. Considered in a religious and cultural sense, water is not only a physical and chemical reality; in all ancient religions and cultures of mankind, water is an original human symbol.

As an undefined substance to which any form can be given, in many creation myths it symbolises the first beginning and the primitive cause of all being. We find such myths in



the Babylonians as well as in the Indians and the Chinese. In Greek pre-Socratic philosophy, Thales of Miletus (6th century BC) held that water was the primitive cause of all things; according to Empedocles (5th century BC), water is one of the four elements of which the world is composed.

As a living and life-giving force, water is the symbol of life and fertility; it is a feminine symbol. As a physical cleansing agent, water is a symbol of psychic purification, renewal and rebirth. Many religions have holy springs and rivers (Ganges, Euphrates and Tigris, Nile, Jordan), with ritual cleansings and baths. Yet, water is not only a symbol of life, for it can also be understood as “water of death”, as a threat, a power of death and chaos. The Flood is a theme that is found also outside the Bible. In the final analysis, the symbol of water remains ambivalent. Modern psychology, too, knows the ambivalence of the symbol of water in dreams.

### III.

This very old human tradition is found also in the Bible in a specifically transformed form. Already on the first page, indeed in the first lines of the Bible, the song of creation commences:

The earth (*ha-arez*) was without form and void (*tohu wa bohu*), and darkness was over the face of the deep (*tehom*), and the Spirit of God (*ruach elohim*) moved over the face of the waters (*ha-maim*) (Gen 1:2).

As if from a remote distance, here the mythic images of primitive chaos – from which the cosmos came into being – are evoked, as is the conception of primitive water as the mother of all life, and Oceanus as the origin of all things. Yet, the immense and powerful images are transformed, they are somehow deprived of their might and of their mythical dimension. We see this already in the immediately preceding sentence, the first sentence of the Bible: “In the beginning God created (*bereschit bara*) heaven and earth (*ha-schamaim we ha-arez*)”. According to the biblical conception, creation is evidently an act of absolute sovereignty. There is no mention of primitive matter or of primitive chaos. No mention of a battle between God and chaos, as in the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic for example.

The biblical story goes further. It does not just narrate the creation as such, but informs us about the order of creation. The biblical account does indeed speak of the separation of “water from water”, “the water under the vault from the water above it”, and also between the water and the dry land (Gen 1:6-10). God also gives his creation an order. He has disposed everything according to size, number and weight (Wisdom 11:21). Thus, we hear again and again: “God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). God approves of his creation; he rejoices in it; he is pleased with it and he blesses it.

Water too is such a created reality; it is not taken as granted; it is not something that we simply have; it is a gift, a divine endowment for which we render gratitude, and for which we must praise God (Ps 148:4). In the song of praise of the three youngsters, the waters above the heaven are called to praise God, as well as the water on earth in all its different forms and physical conditions: rain, dew and snow, and all sources, seas and rivers, are called to praise God (Dan 3:60, 64, 68, 77s.).

Water is understood in its dual dimensions as a means of praising God, and of serving man. The Psalms tell of the life-renewing qualities of water, and of the waters of peace (Ps 23:2). In a general sense, God makes water a place of life. He populates the earth with plants and animals; and water is to “teem with countless living creatures” (Gen 1: 20s). The great sea-monsters are distinguished from small fish. Thus, water is a place of abundant life blessed by God.

This creation of God, in its beauty and splendour, in its marvellous order and in its significance, is entrusted to man. God hands it over to him for trustful stewardship: “Fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1:28). The expressions “subdue the earth” and “rule over it” sound harsh at first, since the Hebraic word *radah* can mean violent subjugation and trampling. Therefore, this passage has often been misunderstood and misused as justification for illimitable abuse and dominion over the earthly world, as vindication for limitless exploitation. This is why the modern environmental crisis is sometimes imputed to the Bible, and we hear accusations such as the “pitiless consequences of Christianity” (Carl Amery).

Unjustly so! Such an understanding of the *dominium terrae* would be in contradiction with the reality of the creation, since all the realities that God created have their own intrinsic value and signification as distinct created entities, which each individual is called to respect, and are not just creatures that anyone can dispose of. Moreover, such an understanding would be a misinterpretation of the divine likeness of humankind, which implies that each individual is called to handle the world like God does: not in violent and destructive ways, but with care and attention. He is called to till it and care for it (Gen 2:16), and to cultivate it. In this mandate to cultivate it, man is responsible to God as true Lord. He is but God’s agent and is obliged to handle the world in a responsible manner. He is entrusted with the “stewardship” of the world.

Man, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27), does not have an unlimited sovereign authority in the world. But God in his kindness hands the earth over to him, and with it also water, for his own use, for nourishment and refreshment. He means to feed and to delight us with it. The Old Testament, especially, knows the joy and the delight provided by the things of the world. It speaks of the delicious fruits of the earth (Gen 2:9).



What happens when man does not respect God's order, when arrogance supplants humility, when human beings act like gods as the lords of creation, when they become immoderate and behave tyrannically with their fellow men and with nature? The consequences of all this are made clear in the biblical story of the Flood (Gen 6-9), which relates: "All the springs of the great abyss broke through, the windows of the sky were opened" (Gen 7:11). Once again, the order created through the distinction between above and below, between dry land and sea, collapses. There is no longer any above or below, all limits are wiped out; what then prevails is destructive, shattering and all devouring chaos.

The image of water and flood as threatening and devouring chaos, and as the power of death, recurs in the Bible (Ps 42:8; 69:3; 124:5; etc.). In particular, the depths of the sea hold something sinister and frightening about them (Jonah 2; 6s; Job 28:14; 39:16; etc.).

If, despite the sins of men, this order remains stable and reliable, if water does not engulf life but rather expands it, then this outflow of God's blessings and goodwill on his creation is understood as the sign of God's covenant with mankind, as described in the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:11, 15). The reliability of the order of creation, its abundance of life, and the way in which life is refreshed and gratified by each draught of fresh and cool water, allows us to experience day after day God's benevolence and blessings.

#### IV.

In the history of God's covenant with mankind, water has an additional meaning; it is a sign of salvation. In a fundamental and archetypal way, that is what happens in the crossing of the Red Sea by the people of Israel, and their rescue from slavery in Egypt (Exod 13-15). For the prophets, it becomes the promise of water as the eschatological gift of salvation. At the end of time, God will provide abundant life-giving water and he will quench all thirst. For the prophet Isaiah it means: "You shall draw water with joy from the springs of deliverance" (Isa 12:3; cf. 30:23, 25; 44:3; 55:1; Zech 14:8; Ez 36:25; 47:1 ss; Ps 46:5; Jn 4:10-15; Apoc 21:6; etc.).

Finally, God is himself the source of living water (Jer 2:13; 17:13). The Psalmist prays: "With thee is the fountain of life" (Ps 36:10). "All my springs are in thee" (Ps 87:7). Jesus applies the words of the prophet Jeremiah to himself as an indication of the Spirit that would flow out of him (Jn 7:37). Christ is now the rock that gives water and life, he is the one who marched with the Israelites through the desert and preserved them from dying of thirst (Exod 17:6; Num 20:7-11; Ps 78:15 s.; 1 Cor 10:4 s.). According to the interpretation of the Church Fathers, he sanctified water through his baptism in the Jordan; the water of death has become a new life-giving water of salvation.

The salvific meaning of water becomes especially clear in the sacrament of baptism. The fourth Gospel sees it symbolically substantiated in the fact that on Jesus's death, blood and water flowed from his side as a sign of the two sacraments of Eucharist and baptism (Jn 19:34; cf. 1 Jn 5:6-8). Baptism expresses all the ambivalence and drama signified by the symbol of water. It means immolation and death with Jesus Christ as well as the gift of new life in him (Rm 6:3-11). Baptismal water has a salvific, purifying, healing, life-giving and vivifying meaning. For through baptism we are cleansed from our sins and we attain new life in Christ (Jn 3:5; Acts 22:16; 1 Cor 6:11). Ephesians 5:26 speaks of cleansing by water and word. According to *1 Pet 3:21*, baptism does not mean the washing of the body, but a request for the cleansing of conscience (cf. Heb 10:22). Titus 3:5 talks about "the water of rebirth and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit".

#### V.

At the time of the Church Fathers, baptism became the starting-point of the theological reflection on the meaning of water. Since water is the source of life, baptism, according to the *Didache*, should be as much as possible administered with living, that is flowing water (7:1).

In the Latin West (to which I limit myself), we find already in Tertullian an eulogy on water. It is an ancient substance and has a higher destination; it is more agreeable to God than the other elements (*De baptismo*, 3). But it can also be the seat of evil spirits; it has the property of conferring degradation and can become a cause of death (*ibid.* 5). However, through the invocation of God and the sanctification by the Holy Spirit (*ibid.* 4-6), it has a purifying and healing effect; it becomes the sacrament of the water (*ibid.* 1) that washes off death (*ibid.* 2).

The Church Father Ambrose, the well-known bishop of Milan, surprises us when he says that water, or the sea, is for him the symbol and paragon of the Gospel (Exameron, V, 7, 17). Ambrose, too, knows the kind of fear and terror aroused by a storm at sea (*ibid.* I, 8, 28). But he also knows the benevolent nature of water; we discern in his thoughts already a sort of ecological balance theory – as we would say today. Water and fire are two basic elements that compensate each other, whereby water ensures that fire does not scorch everything (*ibid.* II, 3, 12). Ambrose describes at great length and in detail the properties of water and the different rivers and seas. He praises water as an elixir of life, and he understands its purifying and healing power. He is aware of the meaning of water in the history of salvation: in the creation, during the Flood, in the exodus, in the march through the wilderness, in the baptism of Jesus and in our baptism (*ibid.* II, 3, 8 ss.; V, I, 1 ss.; 7, 17 ss.).



For Augustine, the other great Western Church Father, the separation of water at the time of creation already signifies baptism (*Confessiones* 13:20). He speaks of *sacramentum diluvii*, which anticipated the future Church (*De catechizandis rudibus* 18:32); finally, he too knows of the typology of the exodus and of the passage of the Red Sea (*ibid.* 18:34). For him the Red Sea is called red, for it has been sanctified by Christ's blood (*In Johannem*, XIV:5).

In Thomas of Aquinas as well (as in many other scholastic theologians), we find – in his brief and dry manner, entirely centred on the essential – an echo of such typologies. Thomas asks whether water is a suitable element for baptism. In his answer he refers to the fact that water purifies and heals, and that in the Old Testament, in the passage of the Israelite people through the Red Sea, water was an anticipated image of baptism (*S. th.* III:66, 3).

## VI.

The theology of the Fathers is fully developed in the liturgy. Important above all is the “*Benedictio fontis*”, the consecration of the baptismal water. It is already certified in Tertullian (*De baptismo*, 4, 4), in Cyprian (*ep.* 70:1; 74) and in Ambrose (*De sacramentis*, 1, 18; *De mysteriis*, 8 ss). According to Hippolyt's “*Traditio apostolorum*”, Chapter 21, every baptism begins with a prayer “*super aquam*”. This is why, according to Tertullian, baptism is not a sacrament of the water but of the faith (*De baptismo*, 13). According to the Second Vatican Council, praise and the invocation of God belong to every baptismal liturgy (*SC* 70).

Detailed prayer texts for the blessing and consecration of baptismal water are included in medieval sacramental books; they have at times an exorcising as well as an anamnetical and epicletical structure (*DThC IV/2*, 1979-84; *LThK X*, 3rd edition, 986 s). Especially marked is the consecration of baptismal water in the Paschal night celebration.

Prayer during the consecration of baptismal water includes the entire water typology of the scriptural covenant of the Church Fathers. In its present form, it reads:

Almighty and eternal God, your invisible might causes the salvation of mankind through visible signs. In many ways, you have chosen water to indicate the mystery of baptism: Ever since the beginning of the creation, your Spirit hovered over the water and gave it the power to save and sanctify. Even the Flood was a sign of the baptism, for the water brought the ruin of sins and a new start of sacred life. When the children of Abraham, after their liberation from the slavery of Pharaoh, marched through a dried-up Red Sea, they were an image of your believers, who are liberated from the slavery of the evil through the water of baptism. Almighty and eternal God, your

beloved Son was baptized by John in the Jordan and anointed by you in the Holy Spirit. As he hung on the cross, blood and water flowed from his side. After his resurrection, he ordered his disciples: ‘Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost’. Almighty and eternal God, look mercifully upon your Church and open to her the wells of baptism. May this water receive the grace of your only begotten Son through the Holy Spirit, so that men, who were made after your image, may be cleansed from the old guilt through the sacrament of baptism, and that your children may raise to new life from the water and in the Holy Spirit. Through your beloved Son, may the power of the Holy Spirit descend in this water, so that all those who are buried with Christ through the baptism, may raise to eternal life. (*Missale*, p. 97-101).

Similar prayers, albeit shorter, may be said for the consecration of baptismal water on the occasion of the ceremony of baptism (*The Celebration of Children's Baptism*, p. 36-40).

In the Latin Church, holy water is a remembrance of baptismal water. Its consecration and use is testified as early as the sixth century. Since the early Middle Ages, it is consecrated before the main Sunday liturgy, and subsequently the people are sprinkled with it in remembrance of baptism. According to the missal used today, the memory of baptism can replace the act of penance foreseen at the beginning of every Eucharistic celebration. The benediction prayers included in the new benedictional mention water as sign of life and purification, and recall again the models in the history of salvation (*Benedictional*, p. 197).

A special ceremony of water consecration is foreseen at the feast of the Epiphany (6th January). The custom of taking home paschal, epiphany and holy water is testified from the 7th century, and was traditional in every Catholic home. Protection of body and soul, goods and chattels was attributed to it. Also today, aspersion with holy water accompanies the benediction of homes or indeed any other object. In the history of piety, holy water is linked to many customs. The waters of Lourdes and Fatima are considered to be particularly curative (*cf. LThK vol. 10*, 3rd edition, 986-988).

The danger of a superstitious use does exist, but the rite of consecration dispels it insofar as consecration is always epicletically formulated as a prayer of intercession, and linked to the sign of the cross; pious usage is also linked to the sign of the cross as a sign of faith. Moreover, it is the task of catechesis and of preaching to teach the right use according to the faith. (*Cf. R. Guardini*, p. 27 s).



## VII.

Let us go back to the Church Fathers. Hugo Rahner affirmed that a whole ecclesiology is hidden under the nautical symbols of sea: navigation, mast, cable, shipwreck and the rescue from shipwreck through the plank of salvation (*Symbols of the Church. The Ecclesiology of the Fathers. Salzburg 1964*).

When they take up the metaphorical language widely used in ancient times, the Fathers often compare life and the world with the sea. “*Mare saeculum est*,” says Augustine (*In Psalmos* 92, 7). Gregory the Great similarly affirms: “*Quid enim mare nisi praesens saeculum significat*” (*Homilien* 24, 2; *Moralia* 17, 30). The sea symbolises above all the vicissitudes of life, first of all the depth of suffering, the storms of passion. Augustine terms it unfathomable in its eagerness for knowledge, foaming in its haughtiness, tormented with neither respite nor rest. In its bitterness and faithlessness it is an image of the sinful man (*Confessiones*, 13:20). It is the emblem of a frightful, higher might, to whom human life is given over. It is regarded as a hostile and dangerous element; and, in its unfathomable reality, as the seat of the dark and demoniac powers hostile to God. (*Many examples in H. Rahner, 280 ss*).

To be a Christian is understood in terms of navigating the sea of the world, bound for a heavenly destination. The earthly Church can also be compared to a journey on this sea of the world. The ship is made from the wood of the cross, the mast is a symbol of the cross; it is the plank of salvation from the shipwreck. With Peter’s small boat, and especially with Noah’s Ark, it stands as emblem of the Church, in which the community of those who are saved outlast the flood of the world. According to Jean Daniélou, no theme is as frequent in the Fathers than the symbolism of Noah’s Ark as model of the Church, in whose lap or ship human beings are spared the judgement of God through water (*Sacramentum futuri*, 55).

This metaphorical language is biblically well-founded (Mt 24:37 s; Lk 17:26 s; 1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 2:5; Heb 11:7). Augustine holds that instruction for the preparation for baptism should include that the Church is prefigured in the Ark (*De catechizandis rudibus* 19:32). “*Ecclesia intra arcam diluvio exundante servata crucis beneficium et baptismatis mysterium praesignavit*” (*Sermo* 230:1; cf. *De civitate Dei* XV, 26). For Ambrose, Noah is “*auctor generationis futurae*” (*De officiis*, I, 25, 121). During the flood, the “*reliquiae generis humanae ad seminarium reparationis et renovationis futurae*” have been rescued through Noah’s Ark (*De Noe* 5:11). (*Many other examples in H. Rahner, 504 ss*).

## VIII.

“*Seminarium reparationis et renovationis*” also for us today? Of course, neither the Holy Scripture nor the Church Fathers were aware of our present environmental problems. Nor can we deduce from the Holy Scripture or from Tradition any specific formula or recipe to resolve our current problems. But with due discernment it is possible to situate the problem of the chaos and the destruction of life caused by man’s technological arrogance in a more constructive and comprehensive horizon than that of the mere feasibility of technological solutions, to look on it in the horizon of what water was originally intended to be, namely to be a space for life, to serve life and to be a sign of eternal life. To bring about this more comprehensive vision in order to encourage, to inspire and to motivate practical professional solutions belongs to the tasks of the Church today, and indeed is her proper contribution towards the solution of the present day crisis.

This stewardship of creation and especially of water is indeed entrusted to all human beings; it is a concern for the whole human community, especially for the State authorities, to whom the *Bonum commune* is particularly entrusted. But the Church has also her specific task to undertake. Through its word and prayer she, in a certain sense, has an exorcistical, purifying, healing and sanctifying task. The purifying, new life-giving and sanctifying significance that is given to water in the Church has also the function of a sign in a wider sense about how we should responsibly handle the elements of the earth, especially water, in correspondence with the order of creation, in order to ensure that it remains a space and source of life and that it can be understood by the faithful as a symbol of the fullness of life which is given to us in Jesus Christ.

That commitment of the Church cannot take the place of a secular and professional engagement, but it can inspire and motivate it. In this sense – to quote again Ambrose – there is a Gospel of the water and of the sea.