

Signs of Life: 40 Catholic Customs and Their Biblical Roots

By Scott Hahn

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Scott Hahn, the bestselling author of The Lamb's Supper and Reasons to Believe, celebrates the touchstones of the Catholic life, guiding readers to a deeper faith through the Church's rites, customs, and traditional prayers.

Signs of Life is beloved author Scott Hahn's clear and comprehensive guide to the Biblical doctrines and historical traditions that underlie Catholic beliefs and practices. Devoting single chapters to each topic, the author takes the reader on a journey that illuminates the roots and significance of all things Catholic, including: the Sign of the Cross, the Mass, the Sacraments, praying with the saints, guardian angels, sacred images and relics, the celebration of Easter, Christmas, and other holidays, daily prayers, and much more.

In the appealing conversational tone that has won him millions of devoted readers, Hahn presents the basic tenets of Church teachings, clears up common misconceptions about specific rituals and traditions, and responds thoughtfully to the objections raised about them. Each chapter concludes with loving, good-natured, inspiring advice on applying the Church's wisdom to everyday life.

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Editorial Review

Review
"Lifelong Catholics realize that it usually takes a convert to help us appreciate and better understand the customs and practices we too often take for granted. Scott Hahn does just that in this immensely reable yet substantive loving look at Catholic prayer, devotions, and beliefs." — Most Reverend Timothy M. Dolan, Archbishop of New York

"There is genius in Catholicism and once again Scott Hahn unveils it like the masterpiece that it is. Every chapter of *Signs of Life* is filled with insights and practices that will change the way you live your life and celebrate your faith."
— Matthew Kelly, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Rediscovering Catholicism* and *The Rhythm of Life*

"Things done for too long can become a habit — and habits have a way of losing their meaning. In this long awaited treasure of a book, Scott Hahn reveals the historical and biblical roots of so many Catholic practices. Finally Catholics will not only know what to do, but why they do it." — Raymond Arroyo, *New York Times* bestselling author and host of EWTN's *The World Over Live*

"Professor Hahn's purpose is both devotional and apologetic. In showing how Catholic popular piety is scripturally grounded, he explains practices that shape Catholic life and help us grow in grace. This is a book that will be helpful to individuals and to the Church as a whole." — Francis Cardinal George, OMI, Archbishop of Chicago

"For decades non-Catholics and even some perplexed Catholics have questioned a number of the beliefs and especially the devotional acts of the Catholic Church. Scott Hahn addresses these questions in *Signs of Life*, producing crystal-clear explanations of the Church's traditional practices. His own background as a convert makes him the perfect person to write this book." — Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, CFR

"Scott Hahn has given us a great contribution in connecting the scriptural and traditional foundations of Catholic devotions and practices. This book will enrich both the spiritual life and theological understanding of every reader." — Fr. Michael Scanlan, TOR, chancellor of Franciscan University of Steubenville and author of *What Does God Want?*

"One of the best ways to break free from spiritual dryness is to learn precisely why we do things. Dr. Hahn's discussion of 'why Catholics do what they do' is thoroughly researched and thoroughly enjoyable. It can help lifelong Catholics appreciate the treasures they've always had, and help non-Catholics appreciate what they may only have seen from afar. Read this book for your own enrichment, but buy one to give away and help someone discover the richness of the Catholic 'Signs of Life'." — Marcus Grodi, host of EWTN's *The Journey Home*

"Scott Hahn gets me excited about my faith. He shares the biblical truth of our deep tradition in a simple way. *Signs of Life* gives us hope that all Christians can unite as ONE Catholic faith." — Justin Fatica, author of *Hard as Nails*

"Learning more about our Catholic life and practices is always a joy. Professor Scott Hahn, in his new book *Signs of Life*, explains forty Catholic customs and practices as pathways to a richer spiritual life. He uses a

unique approach, interweaving these familiar realities with the different stages of the life of a Catholic, highlighting their biblical roots. This handbook should prove very useful to both individuals and faith-sharing groups seeking a deeper understanding of Catholic devotion."
— Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington

"In *Signs of Life*, Scott Hahn has provided a wonderful resource of Catholic belief and practice, as well as an excellent reference for Catholics who want to understand their Faith and its traditions more deeply. Once again, Dr. Hahn has masterfully used his great teaching skills to invite his readers to a richer understanding of Catholic faith, tradition and practice."
— Most Reverend David A. Zubik, Bishop of Pittsburgh

About the Author
Scott Hahn is founder and president of the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology (SalvationHistory.com). A professor at Franciscan University of Steubenville, he also holds the Pope Benedict XVI Chair of Biblical Theology at St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He is the author of many books, including *The Lamb's Supper* (Doubleday), *Hail, Holy Queen* (Doubleday), *Kinship by Covenant* (Yale), and *A Pocket Guide to the Bible* (Our Sunday Visitor). His academic work has appeared in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Journal of Biblical Literature,* and *Currents in Biblical Research.* Dr. Hahn is editor of the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* and *Letter & Spirit: A Catholic Journal of Biblical Theology.* He lives in Steubenville, Ohio.

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1. Holy Water

We begin in water.

That's how the book of Genesis poetically depicts the creation of the universe: "darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters . . . And God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters'?" (Gen 1:2, 6).

As it was in the cosmic, so it is in our personal beginnings: we assume our human form in the amniotic sac, "bag of waters," in the womb. In the order of nature, birth begins when a mother's "water breaks."

So with water we begin our visits to church. We dip a hand into a holy-water font, and we bless ourselves.

There has been a watermark on Christian prayer since the earliest days of the Church. At the end of the second century, a North African theologian named Tertullian mentions the custom of symbolically cleansing one's hands before lifting them in prayer. It was a Jewish custom that predated the coming of Our Lord, and it may be what St. Paul was referring to when he wrote to Timothy: "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands" or "pure hands" (1 Tim 2:8). The historian Eusebius, writing around a.d. 320, describes a church in Tyre that had flowing fountains at its entrance, where the faithful might purify their hands.

We use water to mark our beginnings because God does. We find ample evidence of this in both nature and Scripture. When the world was lost to sin and needed cleansing and rebirth, God sent a great flood, and from that flood the family of Noah found new life. When Israel emerged from slavery as a unified nation, it first had to pass through the waters of the Red Sea. When the chosen people established their places of worship—first the tabernacle and then the Temple—they constructed them with bronze basins for washing upon entry.

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that water has been a natural sacrament since the dawn of creation. In the age of

nature—from Adam through the patriarchs—water refreshed and cleansed humankind. In the age of Law—the time of Moses—water provided a spiritual rebirth for Israel as the nation began its journey to the promised land. With Jesus, however, came the age of grace; and from that time onward water received the divine power of the Word made flesh. Though babies had always been born through "water," now grown men and women could be "born of water and the Holy Spirit" (Jn 3:5). The Church Fathers taught that Jesus, by descending into the waters of the River Jordan, had sanctified the waters of the world. He made them living and life-giving (see Jn 4:10–14). He made them a source of supernatural regeneration, refreshment, and cleansing.

While we are on earth, we know spiritual things by means of sensible signs. It is only in glory that we will see divine things as they are, without their sacramental veils. According to St. Thomas, water ultimately "signifies the grace of the Holy Spirit . . . For the Holy Spirit is the unfailing fountain from whom all gifts of grace flow." The book of Revelation confirms this, as it presents the Spirit's grace as a "river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev 22:1).

Through history and through the cosmos, God has spoken with a voice that is "like the sound of many waters" (Rev 1:15). All the many sacred meanings of water we take for our own and claim as our inheritance—whenever we bless ourselves with holy water.

"Beloved, we are God's children now," born of water and the Spirit. "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 Jn 3:2-3).

This simple action, which even the smallest children love to do, is a reminder and a renewal of our baptism. It is a refreshment, too, providing relief from the oppression of evil. St. Teresa of Avila wrote that "there is nothing the devils flee from more—without returning—than holy water."

Holy water is ordinary water that has been blessed for devotional use by a priest. We bless ourselves with holy water at church. Most churches also provide a dispenser so that parishioners can draw water to take home with them. Some Catholic families keep a little holy-water font at the entryway to every bedroom. I keep a bottle of the stuff in my office at all times.

We need do no more with it than splash a few drops on ourselves. It is customary to pronounce a blessing in the name of the Holy Trinity, too, and trace the outline of a cross with our right hand.

That's enough for now. We'll save the rest for the next chapter.

Ponder in Your Heart

King and Lord of all things and maker of the world: you gave salvation freely to all created nature by the descent of your only-begotten Jesus Christ. You redeemed all that you created by the coming of your ineffable Word. See now from heaven, and look upon these waters, and fill them with the Holy Spirit. Let your ineffable Word come to be in them and tranform their energy and cause them to be generative, as being filled with your grace . . . As your only-begotten Word coming down upon the waters of the Jordan rendered them holy, so now may he descend on these and make them holy and spiritual.

—Blessing of Water, from the sacramentary of St. Serapion of Egypt, fourth century

Users Review

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