

A Place of Change and of Hope

Our society has some clear ways to mark changes and other ways that are not so clear. Transitions in government, for example, are clearly marked by oath taking and speeches and celebration. But what marks someone's transition from youth to adulthood? Is it the granting of a driver's license or the right to vote? Is the *quinceañera* for a young Spanish woman, or the first full-time job, or graduation from college?

In Catholic liturgy, there are clear rituals that mark the changes in a person's status from unbaptized to baptized, from single to married, from one form of existence in the community of faith to another. And the place where such changes are marked is often the doorway to the church.



These "doorway" or "threshold" rituals are important parts of our liturgy, for they remind us that change is an essential aspect of being Christian—growth in the Christian way of life, return to that life when we have left it through sin, change in forms of ministry. The doorway is a good place to mark such moments, because the

door of the church represents Christ. Jesus called himself the "gatekeeper" who calls the sheep by name and the "gate" through which the sheep enter to find salvation (John 10:3, 9). Luke tells us that the preaching of Paul and Barnabas opened a "door of faith for the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). And Laodicean Christians were told that the one knocking on the door is Christ; if they open the door, then Christ "will come in to you and eat with you" (Revelation 3:20).

A medieval blessing for a church door prays that this entrance to the church will be a place of peace "through him who called himself the door and the doorkeeper, Jesus Christ our Lord."

The threshold rites that our liturgy assigns to the church doorway mark our passage from birth to death. They begin with the welcoming of catechumens beginning their journey toward baptism and of children who are being presented for baptism by their parents and by the community. They mark the final ritual of a Christian's life, as the body is met



at the doorway to be clothed once more in the baptismal garment and taken to the place of burial with a final song that prays that Christ, who called this believer, "may take you to himself;/may angels lead you to the bosom of Abraham."

Not only individual believers, but the whole Church is in passage from this life to the reign of God, and there are threshold liturgies that remind us of that movement as well. Each year, especially during Holy Week and the Easter Triduum, our liturgies include rites that mark the passage from outside the church building to inside, that bring us all through the door that is Christ to the living Word of God and the altar table that is also Christ. These include the procession on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion and the procession with the Paschal Candle at the beginning of the Easter Vigil.

These rites of the door and the doorway point us toward the final meaning of all our worship: our hope in Christ and in the reign of God that is already here and is still to come. Crossing the threshold, signed by the cross, we mark a new beginning and a movement toward the fulfillment of sacramental signs. These threshold rites invite us to increase in faith, hope, and love—the faith affirmed by the newly baptized and the ecclesial community that welcomes them, the hope of those who have died in Christ, and the love of those who have been welcomed at the door to commit themselves to one another in holy matrimony. Every time we pass through the doors of our church, we enter through the narrow gate which is Christ, and we cross the threshold into salvation.

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