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The people went to the water and water came to the people as a handful of congregants from Saint Athanasius Orthodox Church and Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church celebrated Epiphany, the holiday that commemorates the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River.

Braving the wind, wetness and chill of the rainy winter noon on Sunday, congregants headed out to Goleta Beach to bless a very large font of water: the Pacific Ocean.

Under cloudy skies, members of both congregations huddled under umbrellas, standing shoulder to shoulder for warmth. In the center were clergy from both churches, a bowl and an icon of Christ being baptized.

The faithful sang hymns to ask for blessings, salvation and guidance and to commemorate the baptism, one of the rare occasions of the manifestation of the Christian God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, according to the spiritual leaders involved in the celebration.

"It's a redemption of the fallen world that we live in," explained Father Simon Thomas, of Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, on the purpose of the Blessing of the Waters, the liturgical practice that involves a procession to a body of water and its blessing.

The purpose is to cleanse away personal sins and also to heal on a more global level, he said. Both churches have the tradition, he added, but only recently started doing them together.

Celebrated on Jan. 6 of the Gregorian calendar, the religious leaders said Epiphany is one of the most significant feast days of the Eastern Church, associated with events of Christ's manifestation through his baptism by John the Baptist, when it is said God the Father spoke from the clouds, and the Holy Spirit descended to Jesus Christ in the form of a dove.

Epiphany is also associated with Christ's first miracle: turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana.

Midway through the singing, the rain petered out and the sun broke through the clouds, prompting gasps and cheers from even the most seasoned of celebrants.

"I am so impressed," Father Nicholas Speier commented to the heavens. "God, you're really good."

After drying out and warming up, the crowd disengaged to follow the traditional blessing of the water.

As in past years, children ready for the occasion leaped through the surf to find the cross that was thrown in to bless the water, and the damp faithful lined up to kiss the icon before heading to their cars.



The Rev. Simon Thomas smiles along with other members of the church as the sun comes out and the rain slows down during their ceremony.

ROBBY BARTHELMESS/NEWS-PRESS



The Rev. Thomas moves the cross around in a dish of ocean water and sand.



The Rev. Simon Thomas walks with the cross to be thrown into the ocean and retrieved by children.

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