

Not so pure after all: Most holy water 'is contaminated with faecal matter' and could be harmful to health

- **86% of holy water contains faecal matter and in every millilitre of holy water there are up to 62 million bacteria**
- **Holy springs contain nitrates from agriculture which make them unsafe**
- **They got their healing reputation at a time when water in cities was dangerously contaminated meaning people were frequently unwell**
- **If they drank from a rural spring for a few days they would recover**
- **Now that water in cities is much safer, this no longer applies**

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The researchers found that in every millilitre of holy water there are up to 62 million bacteria

Many people believe that holy water has healing properties but new research suggests it may actually do more harm than good.

Scientists have discovered that 86 per cent of water samples from holy sources contain faecal matter.

Austrian researchers also found that church fountains contain high levels of bacteria and that none of the holy springs they studied could be considered safe for drinking from.

The researchers, from the Institute of Hygiene and Applied Immunology at the Medical University of Vienna, analysed the water in 21 holy springs in Austria, and in 18 fountains in Vienna, at various times during the year.

They found that in every millilitre of holy water there were up to 62 million bacteria.

They also found that the busier the church, the more bacteria it tended to have in its fountain.

The study also revealed that holy springs contain not only faecal contamination with E coli bacteria and enterococci, but also Campylobacter, which can cause inflammatory diarrhoea.

Many of the springs were also contaminated with nitrates from agriculture making the water unsafe for drinking.

'We need to warn people against drinking from these sources,' said Dr Alexander Kirschner, a microbiologist from the Medical University of Vienna.

He recommends that the responsible authorities and priests put up warning signs by the holy springs.

Dr Kirschner said that the springs got their healing reputation in the Middle Ages and that things have changed since then.

He explained: 'In those days, the quality of the water in towns and cities was generally so poor that people were constantly developing diarrhoea or other diseases as a result.'

‘If they then came across a protected spring in the forest that was not as polluted and drank from it for several days, their symptoms would disappear.

‘So although in those days they were drinking healthier water, given the excellent quality of our drinking water today, the situation is now completely reversed.’

Based on the study’s findings, Dr Kirschner recommends that salt could be added to holy water in fonts to reduce the chance of bacteria thriving, he also suggests that holy water in churches should be changed regularly.