

Holy Unction

There is a significant difference between our practices and those of our Roman Catholic counterparts regarding Holy Oil Anointing (of the Sick). While both traditions agree on the basic principles of this sacrament, they differ in their interpretation of what was once called "Extreme Unction" or "Last Rites". This prayer typically includes penance, communion, anointing, and the commendation of the dying. However, in our Church, these elements do not exist as a single ceremony.

Let us focus on the fundamentals: Holy Unction is the church's prayer for a person's spiritual and physical healing. According to scripture, it is considered a Holy Mystery (sacrament) established by Jesus in chapter six in the Gospel of St Mark, where He anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. Additionally, in the instructions from St James, it is written: "Is anyone among you sick? Let the presbyters of the Church pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. And if he has sinned, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-16). This wording elevates Holy Unction beyond Jewish and pagan anointings, as it involves the prayer of faith and is performed by a priest or presbyter rather than a physician.

The origins of this sacrament trace back to ancestral sin. In the sin of Adam and Eve, humanity became subject to both death and decay; according to St Gregory, the Theologian, the human person "put on the garment of sin", which he describes as the root of all infirmity. According to the Church's teaching, the root of all illness is human sinfulness: sin entered the human experience so that it polluted not only the soul and intellect but also the body. If death is a consequence of sin (cf. James 1:15), illness can be seen as an intermediary stage between sin and death—it follows sin and precedes death.

Recognizing that not every sin results in a specific illness is essential. The real issue lies with the root of all illness: human corruption. As St Symeon, the New Theologian, remarks, "Doctors cure human bodies, but they can never cure the basic illness of human nature, its corruptibility".

When doctors attempt different treatments for one illness, the body often succumbs to another disease. Through the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are restored to the state of Adam and Eve before sin through the mystery of Baptism. A baptized person receives healing and forgiveness through these mysteries, enabling them to become partakers of the divine nature.

The writings of the Church Fathers, including Origen and St Irenaeus, as well as Sts Basil the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom, the latter include prayers for the healing of the infirm, which later became part of the Holy Anointing. It is important to emphasize that our Church does not dismiss reasonable medical treatment and scientific knowledge. These are all products of human intelligence granted by God. Many saints of the Church, such as Sts Cosmas and Damian of Mesopotamia and St Anastasia the Great Martyr, were doctors and pharmacists who healed others through faith, prayer, and medicine. However, the Church has always remembered that humans are psy-

chosomatic beings—composed of both body and soul. What affects us spiritually also impacts us physically, and vice versa. When we have a headache, our spirits may feel distressed; when we are depressed, our bodies can feel exhausted. In this light, Holy Unction is essential for our health and wholeness. Pope Innocent I was asked questions concerning the anointing, and he answered that it should be performed upon believers who are sick, not just anyone. It may be performed by a bishop, not just a presbyter because Jesus would not have excluded them from this ministry. It may not be performed on those undergoing an ecclesiastical penance because those who are in a period of penance could not receive a sacred mystery.

Once this author was called to anoint a priest, the entire ceremony was provided. The elderly priest began to cry because he had never done the whole ceremony, and he found it so meaningful and beautiful. The mystery is *sobornal*, which means that as many of the faithful as possible are to gather and participate in the prayers. The ritual calls for seven priests, seven epistles and gospels, seven prayers, and seven anointings. The priest anoints the person on the forehead, eyes, ears, nostrils, lips, chest, and hands each time in the form of a cross, saying: "Our Holy Father, physician of our souls and bodies, heal your servant (*name*) from every physical and emotional affliction."

The oil that is used is that of an olive because naturally, and in the tradition of the Jews, it was seen as a natural sign of healing and forgiveness, which belonged to God's mercy. In some cases, a little wine is mixed in the oil the same way that the Good Samaritan poured wine and oil on the injuries of the stranger in the tenth chapter of the gospel of St Luke. The open gospel book is placed over the head of the person being anointed as a sign of Christ Himself touching the one being anointed with His healing hand through His body and the Church.

In our liturgical tradition in the past, it has been customary on Holy and Great Wednesday to remember the anointing of Christ by a sinful woman before His crucifixion. In some traditions, people anoint themselves. But in the afternoon or evening, when the gospel mystery is reread with the events of the Last Supper, we remember the woman who anointed Christ's feet. But also, on holy Wednesday, we remember Judas plotting with the Jewish authorities. The repentance and redemption of the sinful woman are seen in strict contrast with the tragic fall of the once-chosen disciple.

The unction of the sick is a specific prayer for healing. If the faith of the believers is strong enough and it is the will of God, there is every reason to believe that the Lord can heal those who are diseased or sick. Since the sacrament also provides spiritual healing, it is also seen as preparation for the reception of communion on Holy Thursday.

It may also be used liturgically in the case of a dying person when it is done in conjunction with the prayers for the separation of the soul and body. The holy unction is a mystery of this mental, physical, and spiritual healing of the sick person, whatever the nature of the illness may be. It is Christ's gift of grace to heal the spiritual ills, all the ills of a person in their growth in theosis.

Fr Jonathan Morse