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Unction

Unction is a special church sacrament, the purpose of which is to heal a person of illnesses of soul and body. In ancient times it was called by various names: oil, holy oil, anointing with oil, and oil of prayer (from the Greek ευχέλαιον/*euchelaion*). In the Russian vernacular the sacrament is called *soborovanie*, since it is performed by an assembly (*sobor*) of priests. Plant oil, usually olive oil, is use for the sacrament.[1]

Oil As a Religious Symbol. Formation of the Service Order

In ancient times oil was one of the primary medicinal substances, and was employed particularly in the treatment of wounds (cf. Is 1.6). Olive oil was used in oil lamps (cf Ex 27.20). Along with wheat and wine, oil was one of the primary foodstuffs (cf. Deut 11.14): an abundance of oil was perceived as a blessing from God (cf. Deut 7.13, Jer 31.12), and a lack thereof as punishment (cf. Mic 6.15, Hab 3.17). As a foodstuff oil goes into a person, entering into his bones (cf. Ps 108.18). Oil was also a cosmetic: it was used to anoint the body and for fragrant rubs (cf. Am 6.6, Esth 2.12, Ps 91.11), and people would oil their hair (cf. Ps 22.5).

A table prepared for the sacrament of unction

In the Old Testament tradition oil was one of the primary religious symbols. Oil was a symbol of healing, salvation, and reunion with God (cf. Ez 16.9). Furthermore, it was a symbol of joy (cf. Ps 44.8, 103.15), love (cf. Song 27.9), and brotherly fellowship (cf. Ps 132.2). Oil was a symbol of being chosen by God and of royal power, and so it was used to anoint kings and priests (this significance of oil and the symbolism of anointing is discussed above in the context of the sacrament of chrismation). Through anointing with oil (chrism) the Spirit of God was imparted to one chosen by God (cf. 3 Kg 10.1–6, 16.13).

In the Christian tradition oil has become, first and foremost, a symbol of spiritual healing. In this sense it is mentioned particularly in the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10.34). At the same time oil is a symbol of light, appearing in this capacity in the parable of the ten virgins (cf. Mt 25.1–13). The Greek word ἔλεος/*eleos* (mercy) sounds similar to the word ἔλαιον/*elaion* (oil), and so oil was perceived as a symbol of compassion, reconciliation, and joy.

One important aspect of the earthly ministry of Christ was the healing of illnesses, and the Gospel is filled with accounts of the numerous healings that the Savior performed. No instances of Christ using oil for healing are recorded in the Gospel; nevertheless, when he sent his disciples to preach *they went out, and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them* (Mk 6.12–13). Thus, in Christ's time oil was already used in the Christian community to heal illnesses.

In the apostolic ministry following Christ's resurrection the healing of the sick held an important place (cf. Acts 3.2–8, 5.15–16, 8.7, 9.32–34, 28.8). In the apostolic era the gift of healing was possessed not only by the apostles, but also by other members of the Christian community (cf. 1 Cor 12.9). Apparently the ministry of healing was one aspect of the work of the presbyters, as evinced by the words of the apostle James: "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick . . . and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him" (Jas 5.14–15).

These words of the apostle James are the chief record of the existence of the sacrament of unction in the apostolic era (even if it was not called a sacrament and was not formulated as a separate service order). The primary elements of the sacrament are the participation of several presbyters and anointing the sick person with oil. The power of healing, however, is imputed not to the oil, but to "the prayer of faith." The sacrament must have a dual effect: it must promote physical healing and bestow forgiveness of sins.

Few accounts of this sacrament's existence are found in the works of the Eastern Christian writers of the third to fifth centuries. For example, in speaking about repentance Origen quotes the words of the apostle James about anointing the sick with oil, but in so doing he replaces the words "pray over him" with "place their hands on him" (which may confirm that there was a custom of laying hands on the sick when anointing them with oil).[2] John Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria quote the words of the apostle James, but they offer no commentary on them.[3] In another place Chrysostom mentions those who "have put away diseases by anointing themselves with oil in faith and in due season,"[4] but gives no indication of where and how this anointing took place.

Martyred unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian. St Bessarion Monastery. Meteora, Greece. 16th c.

The Antiochian presbyter Victor (fifth century) wrote in more specific terms:

> James also says the same thing . . . in the Catholic Epistle. . . . And the oil also heals pain and is a cause of light and a source of cheerfulness. Therefore, the oil used in anointing indicates also the mercy that comes from God, and the healing of disease, and the illumination of the heart, for it is manifest to anyone anywhere that prayer brings about everything; and the oil, so I suppose, is a symbol of these things.[5]

The silence of the Eastern Christian authors regarding the sacrament of unction is understood by many researchers to mean, first, that the ancient fathers "had few occasions to speak of the sacrament of unction, which was imparted not in the church at a solemn service, but in private homes"; second, that the ancient fathers of the Church viewed unction either as a supplement to penance (Origen) or as part of the last rites; and third, "the silence of the fathers of the Church concerning this sacrament is due to the custom of keeping sacred things secret."[6]

The latter explanation is hardly convincing: the "discipline of secrecy" (*disciplina arcani*) or "secret discipline" (*disciplina arcana*) was employed by a few second- and third-century authors with regard to the sacrament of the Eucharist and several other church customs; in the fourth century, however, this sacrament was spoken of quite freely and in detail. There were no grounds therefore for shrouding the sacrament of unction in an aura of silence. A more probable explanation for the silence of Eastern Christian authors regarding unction is that this sacrament was relatively undeveloped in the period under discussion, as well as possibly the fact that it was employed but rarely—only in cases of particularly grave illness.

As for the Western writers of the fifth and sixth centuries, these explicitly mention unction as a sacrament. Pope Innocent I (402–417) mentions "the believing sick, who may be anointed with the holy oil of chrism, or of anointing." Further on, in answer to the question of whether a bishop may perform this anointing, he writes, "There is no reason to doubt the ability of a bishop to

do that which a presbyter may certainly perform. The apostle speaks of presbyters because the bishops, limited by their activities, cannot visit all the sick." Finally, Pope Innocent writes of the impermissibility of imparting this sacrament to those who are under an ecclesiastical penance: "But it cannot be administered to penitents, because it is a kind of Sacrament. For how should it be supposed that one kind of Sacrament could be granted to those, who are denied the other Sacraments?"[7]

According to the instructions of the apostle James, the sacrament of unction is to be performed in the home of the sick person ("Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church"). There are, however, numerous indications that—at least from the fourth century on—the sacrament was also performed in churches. This custom was promoted by the establishment of hospitals next to churches in the sixth and seventh centuries. In the euchologia of the tenth and eleventh centuries the church is specified as the place for the sacrament of unction, and the sacrament itself is linked to the liturgy.[8] Thus, for example, an euchologion from 1027 speaks of seven priests serving the divine liturgy together, and oil being blessed before the liturgy begins. At the liturgy special troparia and readings thematically related to unction are added. The actual anointing of the sick person takes place following the prayer below the ambon.[9]

In certain liturgical manuscripts the sacrament of unction was linked to other services of the daily cycle, particularly vespers and matins. One thirteenth-century manuscript states, "On the same day when unction is appointed, seven presbyters shall assemble and serve vespers with a panikhida and shall sing a canon. At the conclusion of matins the seven presbyters shall serve the liturgy in different churches, then assemble in a single church, and here they shall perform the order of holy oil."[10]

As the custom of building hospitals next to churches died out in the thirteenth century, the link between unction and the divine services was also severed. The euchologia of the period that followed indicate the church and the home as two possible places for performing the sacrament.[11] Vespers was omitted, but the link with matins remained: the hymns and prayers of matins were mingled with the rite of unction, forming the first part of the service.[12]

The apostle James does not specify the number of presbyters required to serve unction. It is supposed that in the period up to the seventh century the sacrament was performed by three presbyters, and in the seventh and eight centuries seven became customary. In any case, the surviving service orders of the sacrament in the liturgical manuscripts of the ninth and tenth centuries already speak of seven presbyters.[13] Interestingly, the "Order of Holy Oil" in manuscript № 973 in the Sinai Monastery library, dated 1153, which mentions "seven presbyters," also states that "in case of necessity or want of presbyters, two or three perform the sacrament."[14]

We find similar recommendations from Symeon of Thessalonica, in the chapter devoted to the sacrament of unction:

> Others, for want of priests, summon only three; and this should not be censured, because first it is for the sake of the power of the Holy Trinity, and then also in remembrance of the witness and preaching that occurred once through Elias, when he raised the dead son of the woman of Sarepta, having prayed thrice and thrice lain outstretched upon him (cf. 1 Kg 17.21–22). . . . And there must be seven presbyters, according to the ancient custom, or out of necessity less than three, and they speak all that is commanded to say."[15]

It is apparent that although the service order presumes that there are seven presbyters, in reality it has not always been possible to achieve this number, and so three priests could perform the sacrament—in some cases two or even one.

In the West, beginning in the fifth century, it became the practice for the oil to be blessed by the bishop, while the presbyters anointed the sick person with the blessed oil. This practice was affirmed by a series of councils, including the Council of Trent (1545–1563), one decree of which states, "The Church has understood the matter thereof to be oil blessed by a bishop."[16] In the East

the blessing of the oil was part of the actual rite of unction: it was performed by the senior of seven (or three) presbyters immediately before anointing the sick person.

In both East and West unction was served for those gravely or even mortally ill. In the East a mortally ill person was anointed in the hope that he would be healed. In the West, however, beginning in approximately the tenth century unction came to be viewed as the last rites for a dying man as he passed over into eternal life. The sacrament was given the name *extrema unction* (Latin, "the last anointing"). A decree of the Council of Trent states, "This unction is to be applied to the sick, but to those especially who lie in such danger as to seem to be about to depart this life: whence also it is called the sacrament of the departing" (*sacramentum exeuntium*).[17]

The Orthodox polemicized against this understanding of the sacrament, insisting that in accordance with the words of the apostle James, and also in accordance with the text of the rite itself, unction must be administered to the sick unto the healing of soul and body. Patriarch Nicephorus II of Constantinople (1260) refutes the opinion that unction may be administered to the dying, citing the words of the service order: "By Thy Spirit descend upon thy servant, that he may walk in Thy laws the remaining time of his life," and again, "Raise him up from the bed of sadness and the couch of suffering."[18]

Only in the twentieth century did the Catholic Church partially renounce the medieval concept of unction as last rites. Concerning unction the current Catechism of the Catholic Church says that it is imparted to those who are "seriously ill" and that it "is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death." In the words of the Catechism, "it is fitting to receive the Anointing of the Sick just prior to a serious operation." It also states, however, that "the fitting time . . . to receive this sacrament" is "as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age."[19] If it is given to those gravely ill, "even more rightly is it given to those at the point of departing this life."[20] The Catechism clarifies that "in addition to the Anointing of the Sick" the Church offers the Eucharist to one who is dying as a viaticum.[21]

In the Greek Church, beginning in the twelfth century, there was a custom of performing the sacrament of unction for the dying. This custom grew out of a more ancient tradition—that of anointing one who had died with oil as one of the burial rituals. Eastern Christian authors varied in their attitudes toward this custom. In the thirteenth century Patriarch Nicephorus condemned it severely.[22] In the fourteenth century Symeon of Thessalonica exhibited a more lenient attitude toward the custom. Regarding administering unction to the deceased, he noted that "certain bishops forbid [it] as not being relayed in Scripture, while others permit it as being administered for the soul's benefit." Symeon himself held that anointing a deceased person with oil is permissible, but that "this is not the oil that was relayed by the Savior and the apostles" for the healing of the sick: "For the dead oil is offered as an offering and to the glory of God, for the sake of mercy toward the departed and forgiveness [of their sins], just as wax candles, incense, and many other things are offered for them in the churches and the sepulchers."[23]

The spread of the view of unction as a last anointing in the West, and the practice of administering this sacrament to the departed or to healthy people in the East, was facilitated by the fact that the sacrament was performed unto the remission of sins. The writers of ancient times (e.g., Origen, Chrysostom) linked this sacrament with repentance, and at a significantly later period the view of unction as a sort of supplement to confession began to spread. Some surmise that in the sacrament of unction forgotten sins are forgiven. This interpretation, however, does not follow either from the service order of the sacrament or from the theological tradition of the Eastern Church. Forgotten sins are forgiven in the sacrament of confession, as stated above.[24] As for the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of unction, this is derived not from a need to supplement confession, but rather from an awareness of the fact that healing of the soul is no less important than healing of the body: without the former the latter is impossible. For this reason the prayer for healing from sickness is joined to a petition for remission of sins.

Can the sacrament of unction be administered to healthy people? To this question there is no definite answer. On the one hand, the entire service order of the sacrament shows that it is to be administered to one who is gravely ill, whose health and very life are in grave danger. On the other hand, theological and liturgical literature from the tenth century on repeatedly mentions—in one context or another—the possibility of anointing healthy people who are present at the anointing of one who is sick.[25] A Greek manuscript dated 1027 states that the household of a sick person may receive unction together with him.[26] Similar instructions are recorded in Greek and Slavic manuscripts up through the seventeenth century.[27]

In the Orthodox East the concept that unction may be administered to healthy people gave rise to the practice of so-called "general unction," where the sacrament of unction was administered en masse to all who wished. This is a fairly early practice: it existed in the Great Church of Constantinople, and from there it made its way to Russia. In the Greek Church of the seventeenth century this ritual was particularly associated with Great Thursday and Great Saturday. The Russian traveler Arseny Sukhanov, who visited Jerusalem in the mid-seventeenth century, described in detail the "general unction" that was performed in Jerusalem on Great Saturday:

> At the third hour of the day the patriarch left the church and entered his courtyard, as did all the others. And having come to his own house, and tarried in his cell, he went to the emperor Constantine[28] to bless oil for select people who contribute the most, and there he anointed them, closeted in the church. Then he blessed oil in his patriarchal cathedral porch, and all the authorities and priests, monks and other laymen here were anointed; and when he anointed anyone that person would give him an *efimok,*[29] some half of one; and the deacon stood near him with a tray, and they would place the money in the tray he held. After this all the worshippers were given a candle each, and for each candle an *efimok* was collected for the patriarch. After this, though some did so before, they would come to the patriarch in his cell to confess their sins, monks and laymen, nuns and women. In the Great Church the church was filled with all kinds of people, and here the metropolitan blessed oil and anointed all comers, Arab Christians, men, women, and infants.[30]

Despite the fact that accounts of the practice of administering the sacrament of unction to healthy people and the practice of "general unction" are encountered fairly early, neither custom can be considered to be in keeping with the meaning of the sacrament. Furthermore, if a priest anoints himself before anointing a sick person, this does not mean that he is simultaneously administering the sacrament of unction to himself. His doing so may be explained by the widespread perception in the Orthodox Church (reflected in the words of the service orders of several sacraments) that administering a sacrament to a particular member of the Church may also benefit the one who administers it. The same should be said regarding anointing the household of the sick person: the members of his household may be anointed with blessed oil once before administering the sacrament to the sick person, or conversely at the end of the sacrament. Here the anointing signifies the blessing of the Church (similar to that given at the anointing with oil at the all-night vigil), and not the administering of the full sacrament of unction to each person present.

The Meaning and Content of the Sacrament

In Christianity illness is understood to be a consequence of sinful human nature: illness of the body is inseparably linked with the sinful state of the soul.[31]

The link between illness and sin is established in the Bible itself, according to which illnesses entered the life of man as one consequence of the fall into sin (cf. Gen 3.16–19). Frequently illness has been perceived as the punishing right hand of God (cf. Job 16.12, 19.21). On the other hand, illness may be sent to a person through the agency of Satan (cf. Job 2:7). In the Old Testament illnesses were perceived as punishment for sins; consequently, prayer for

healing was accompanied by confession of sins (cf. Ps 37.2–6, 38.9–12). The Old Testament does not prohibit consulting physicians or taking medicine (cf. 2 Kg 20.7, Tob 11.10–11, Jer 8.22), but it is sinful to consult physicians without simultaneously trusting to God's help (cf. 2 Chr 16.12).

One book of the Bible contains an entire ode to physicians and their art: "Honor a physician with the honor due unto him for the uses which ye may have of him, for the Lord hath created him. For of the Most High cometh healing, and he shall receive honor of the king. . . . The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth, and he that is wise will not abhor them. . . . Then give place to the physician, for the Lord hath created him: let him not go from thee, for thou hast need of him" (Sir 38.1–2, 4, 12). On the other hand, this same book speaks of the necessity of turning to God in prayer in times of illness and offering repentance for one's sins: "My son, in thy sickness be not negligent, but pray unto the Lord, and he will make thee whole. Leave off from sin, and order thine hands aright, and cleanse thy heart from all wickedness" (Sir 38.9–10).

The New Testament joins the Old Testament in acknowledging Satan's role as one of the causes of illness in men: of the woman who was bent over Jesus said that "Satan hath bound" her (Lk 13.16). Nevertheless, in the New Testament sin is declared to be the chief cause of illness. For this reason when healing people Jesus simultaneously remitted their sins (cf. Mt 9.2, Mk 2.5, Lk 5.20) and warned them against repeating their former sins (cf. Jn 5.14). This indicates the insufficiency of healing the body without treating the soul.

Christian tradition expounds on the question of the link between sin and illness in considerable detail. In answer to the disciples' question regarding the man who was born blind—"Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?"—Christ answered, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (Jn 9.2–3). In this instance the "works of God" are the miraculous healing that Christ performed. However, as Cyril of Alexandria emphasizes, it must not be thought that the man could have been born blind so that Christ might be glorified through his healing: "The man was not born blind on account of his own sins or the sins of his parents; but since it has happened that he was so affected, it is possible that in him God may be glorified."[32] In other words, the glory of God may be manifested not only in healing, but in the illness itself.

In the Christian understanding, a particular illness may result from a particular sin, but in many instances it is in no way related to a specific sin and is not caused by it. There are congenital illnesses for which a person cannot possibly be personally responsible. Christianity does not hold a person personally responsible for his own illnesses, but it does speak of the responsibility of mankind and of each individual for mankind's common sinfulness, which is the cause of illnesses for every man.

The correlation between sin and illness can present in different ways. Barsanuphius and John of Gaza say that sometimes an illness directly results from certain sins: "Illnesses that occur through negligence or disorder are natural. . . . It is up to you to be neglectful or prodigal and to fall into those, until you reach the point of correction."[33] In other instances illness is sent from God as a punishment for sin—"for our benefit, in order that we might repent."[34] Certain illnesses are produced by "bile," that is, by physiological causes, while others are "of the demons."[35] Finally, "illness is also there to tempt us, and the temptation is there to test us."[36]

The Christian teaching on illnesses is reflected in one of the *Alphabetical Chapters* ascribed to Symeon the New Theologian.[37] Here it is said that illness is the result of corruption, which has affected the whole nature of man:

> Illness is nothing other than the loss of health. And since illness has become natural, it is natural that it does not change. Think, therefore, what tremendous power is required for what is natural, that is, the illness, to be changed into what is supernatural (that is, health). . . . Physicians who treat men's bodies . . . can by no means heal the chief natural illness of the body, that is, corruption, but they strive by numerous and varied means to restore the dysfunctional body to its former state. It however falls

> into yet another illness. . . . For example, the physician attempts to heal the body of dropsy . . . or of pleurisy, but not of corruption, because the body is corruptible by nature.[38]

Thus, illnesses insinuated themselves into human nature as a result of corruption, and corruption appeared due to sin. Hence the question of the author of the *Chapters*: if the treatment of secondary infirmities requires so much effort, what supernatural power must be needed to heal the primary illness of human nature —corruption? This power, replies the author, is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Godman. Every man who believes in him and communes of his grace receives true health.[39]

The Christian understanding of how a person must endure illnesses has a threefold dimension. First, in ancient ascetic writings and hagiographic literature one encounters numerous indications that illnesses must be endured, being sent from above: "The bed of sickness can be a place of where one comes to know God. The sufferings of the body are frequently the cause of spiritual delights."[40]

Second, Christian writers, echoing the Bible, not only do not prohibit consulting physicians, but even extol the medical profession. Gregory the Theologian calls medicine "the result of philosophy and laboriousness."[41] He considers this art "wonderful," emphasizing that "it treats of physiology and temperament, and the causes of disease, in order to remove the roots and so destroy their offspring with them."[42]

Third, in the Christian hierarchy of values, God, being the "Physician of souls and bodies," is superior to every physician, and the healing of soul that God bestows is superior to the treatment of bodily infirmities.

It is in light of this understanding that the prayer for remission of the sufferer's sins occupies so important a place in the sacrament of unction. The sacrament may not produce healing of the illness, but it invariably produces remission of sins. This is witnessed both by the very service order of the sacrament and by many authors, particularly Symeon of Thessalonica:

> For every believer who wishes to approach the dread mysteries, especially for anyone who has fallen into sins and fulfilled the rule of repentance, and is preparing for communion and has received forgiveness from his (spiritual) father, his sins are remitted through this sacred ritual and the anointing with holy oil, as the brother of the Lord writes; and the prayers of the priests likewise facilitate this.[43]

> Having sinned, we approach the divine men and, offering repentance, make confession of transgressions; at their command we offer oil to God as a sign of His mercy and compassion, in which shines the divine and gentle light of grace; for we too offer light.[44] When the prayer is made and the oil is blessed, those anointed with oil receive remission of sins, like unto the harlot who anointed the Savior's feet and from them received the anointing upon herself.[45]

Although the text of the sacrament of unction consists primarily of prayers for the healing of the sick person, this sacrament, as Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann notes, does not guarantee healing. Nevertheless, the spiritual rebirth that this sacrament is able to produce is of no less importance—and may indeed be more important—than the healing of physical illnesses:

> A sacrament—as we already know—is always a *passage*, a *transformation*. . . . And healing is a sacrament because its purpose or end is not *health* as such, the restoration of physical health, but the *entrance* of man into the life of the Kingdom, into the "joy and peace" of the Holy Spirit. In Christ everything in this world, and this means health and disease, joy and suffering, has become an ascension to and entrance into this new life, its expectation and anticipation. . . . [I]n Christ suffering is not "removed"; it is transformed into victory. The defeat *itself* becomes victory, a way, an entrance into the Kingdom, and this is the only true *healing*. . . . Through his own suffering, not only has all suffering acquired a meaning, but it has been given the power to become itself the sign, the sacrament, the proclamation, the "coming" of

that victory; the defeat of man, his very *dying*, has become a way of Life.[46]

The Service Order of Unction

The modern service order for the sacrament of unction is the fruit of many years of evolution. Its basic structure was formed by the eighteenth century: it includes the blessing of oil, the reading of a canon, seven readings from the epistles and seven from the Gospel, and the anointing of the sick person.

The rite of unction in the modern Book of Needs is titled "The Office of Holy Unction, Sung by Seven Priests Assembled in a Church, or in a House." It is prefaced by the following remark: "A small table is prepared, upon which is set a vessel containing wheat: and on the wheat an empty shrine-lamp. And round about are set seven wands, wrapped with cotton for the anointing, and thrust into the wheat: and the book of the Holy Gospels lieth there also, and tapers are given to all the priests." Here the "empty shrine-lamp" refers to a votive lamp containing no oil. Apparently it is presumed that oil will be poured into it later, when it is to be blessed. In practice a votive lamp or other vessel filled with oil is placed upon the table at the outset.

The use of a votive lamp in the sacrament of unction is due to the custom of using the same oil with which the oil lamps are filled.[47] The significance of the wheat is not entirely clear: possibly it is linked to the blessing of the "wheat, wine, and oil" at matins, and is a holdover from the era when unction was included as part of one of the services of the daily cycle.[48] The wands for anointing are usually short wooden (or metal) rods. In ancient times the priest would anoint with his finger,[49] but later practice found this means somewhat inconvenient.

The first part of the service order is comprised of an abbreviated matins service: it includes the reading of Psalms 142 and 50, a small litany, the singing of "Alleluia," and the troparia "Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us," as well as a canon, exapostilarion, and stichera. This canon bears the superscription "A Song of Arsenius," which in all likelihood ascribes authorship to the holy hierarch Arsenius, archbishop of Kerkyra (Corfu), who lived in the ninth century.[50] The sick person is referred to here as "sorely suffering," in need of healing of soul and body, and of deliverance "from terrors and pains."[51]

After the canon an exapostilarion is read, which implies that the anointing is to take place in church: "In mercy, O Good One, cast thine eyes upon the petitions of us who today are come together in thy holy temple, to anoint thy sick servant with thine oil divine." Then special stichera are sung in which healing is asked for the sick person. Next this troparion follows: "Thou who alone art a speedy succor, O Christ, manifest thy speedy visitation from on high upon thy sick servant; deliver him from his infirmities, and cruel pain; and raise him up again to sing praises unto thee, and without ceasing to glorify thee."

Next the great litany is intoned, with additional petitions that the oil may be blessed and that the grace of the Holy Spirit may come upon the sick person. The priest pours wine into the lamp containing the oil and reads the prayer of blessing of the oil, "that it may be effectual for those who shall be anointed therewith, unto healing, and unto relief from every passion, every malady of the flesh and of the spirit, and every ill."

Prayers for the blessing of oil have been known in the Church since the earliest centuries. The first such prayer is found in the *Apostolic Tradition,* which likewise mentions that the use of blessed oil must be "unto the healing" of those who receive it (this refers to receiving it internally, that is, consuming it as food):

> If anyone offers oil he <the bishop> shall render thanks in the same manner as for the offering of bread and wine, not saying it word for word, but to the same effect, saying: O God, sanctify this oil: grant health to all who are anointed with it and who receive it, and as you anointed kings, priests, and prophets, so may it give strength to all who consume it and health to all who are anointed with it.[52]

Concerning adding wine to the votive lamp containing the oil, mention of this custom is made in liturgical manuscripts dating

back to the twelfth century. Apparently wine served as a reminder of the good Samaritan, who poured oil and wine upon the man who was wounded (cf. Lk 10.34).

Next the troparion "Thou who alone art a speedy succor" is repeated once again, followed by other troparia along the same lines, as well as troparia and kontakia to certain saints—the apostle James, St Nicholas, the great martyr Demetrius, the great martyr Panteleimon, all the holy unmercenaries, the apostle John the Theologian, and the Most Holy Theotokos. These particular saints were selected since the apostle James was the first Christian author to mention anointing the sick with oil, while St Nicholas, the great martyrs Demetrius and Panteleimon, and the unmercenaries are all venerated as wonderworkers and healers.

Following the troparia the rite itself begins, in which seven priests are to take part by turns. Consequently the rite consists of seven parts: each part includes a prokeimenon, an epistle reading, and a Gospel reading; a litany for the recovery of the sick person and for the forgiveness of his sins; and a separate prayer to which a second prayer, read at each of the seven parts, is appended. This common prayer begins with these words:

> O holy Father, Physician of souls and bodies, who didst send thine Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, which healeth every infirmity and delivereth from death: Heal thou, also, thy servant, *N.*, from the ills of body and soul which do hinder him, and quicken him, by the grace of thy Christ. . . .

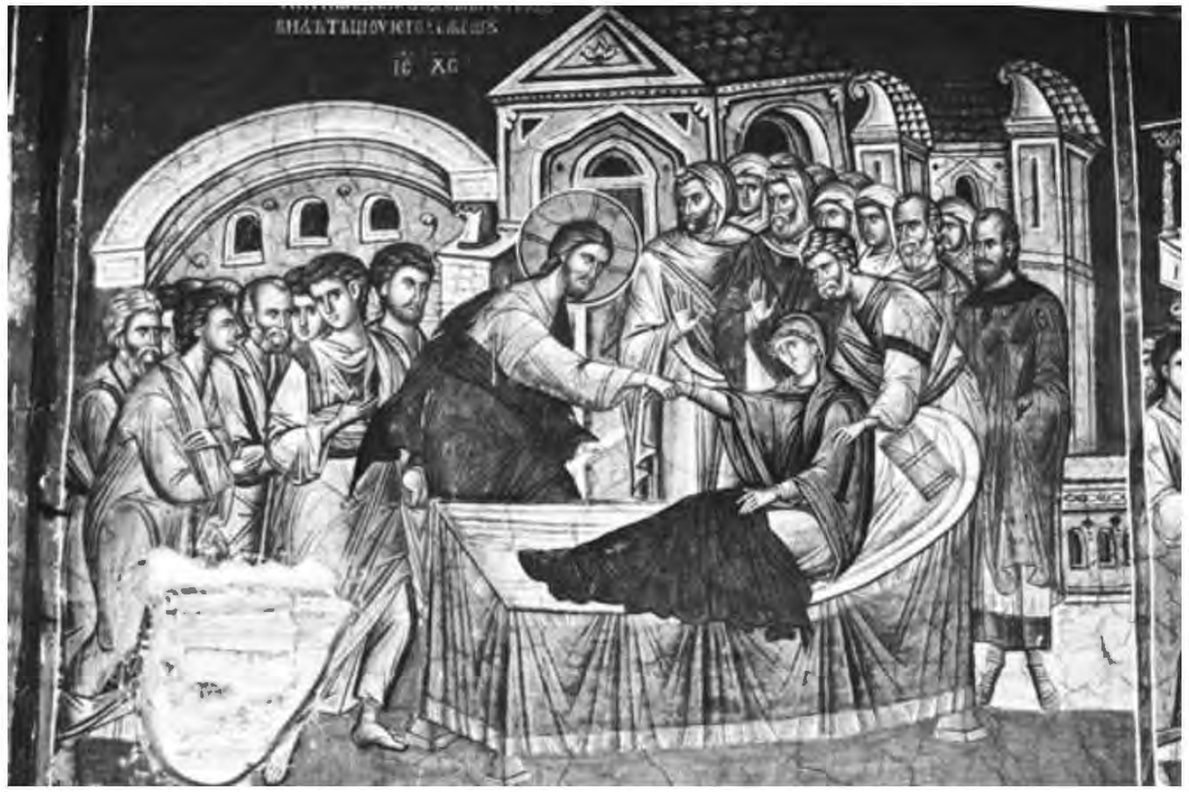
This prayer mentions the Most Holy Theotokos, John the Forerunner, the apostles, martyrs, and venerable fathers, and also the holy unmercenaries by name—Cosmas and Damian, Cyrus and John, Panteleimon and Hermolaus, Sampson and Diomedes, Photius and Anicetus.

The epistle and Gospel readings are not related thematically, but rather comprise two parallel selections on the theme of healing and forgiveness of sins. These two selections of readings center on the concepts of Christ as the Physician of infirmities of soul and body, the link between healing and repentance, Christian mutual aid, and compassion and love.

The first epistle reading is a passage from the epistle of James, which describes the anointing of the sick with oil (Jas 5.10–16). The second reading (Rom 15.1–7) describes Christian solidarity: the strong must bear the infirmities of the weak. The third reading (1 Cor 12.27–13.8) describes various gifts in the Church, including the "gift of healings," and speaks of love as an all-encompassing gift without which the other gifts are meaningless. The fourth reading (2 Cor 6.16–7.1) speaks of Christians as the temple of the living God and of the necessity of cleansing oneself from all impurity of flesh and spirit. The fifth epistle reading (2 Cor 1.8–11) reminds us that God has the power to deliver a person from death. The sixth reading (Gal 5.22–6.2) contains the teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and an admonition to Christians to correct one who has sinned in a spirit of meekness and to bear one another's burdens. Finally, the seventh reading (1 Thess 5.14–23) contains an exhortation to warn those who are unruly, to comfort the faint-hearted, to help the weak, and to be longsuffering toward all, not rendering evil for evil and always seeking good, always rejoicing, praying continually, and giving thanks for all things.

The first Gospel reading is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10.25–37), the symbolism of which formed the basis for the sacrament of unction. The second reading (Lk 19.1–10) recounts the Lord's visit to the house of Zacchaeus the publican: this reading apparently shows unction in the home to be a visit from the Lord to one who is ailing. The third reading (Mt 10.1, 5–8) recounts how Christ gave the apostles the power "to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease." The fourth Gospel reading (Mt 8.14–23) relates how the Lord healed Peter's mother-in-law and others who were ill. The fifth reading (Mt 25.1–13) contains the parable of the ten virgins: characteristically, the parable employs the symbolism of oil. The sixth Gospel (Mt 15.21–28) tells of how Christ healed the possessed daughter of the Canaanite woman. The seventh Gospel passage (Mt 9.9–13) recounts how Christ called the tax collector Matthew, and contains Christ's words: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick." The true Physician is

Christ, Who came "not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5.32).



The healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Fresco. Dečani, Kosovo. 14th c.

The first priestly prayer, read by the senior presbyter, resembles the beginning of the anaphora at the liturgy of Basil the Great in its subject matter. Like the anaphora, it begins by addressing God the Father: "O thou who art without beginning, eternal, the Holy of Holies, who didst send down thine Only-begotten Son to heal every infirmity and every wound, both of our souls and bodies. . . ." In this prayer the priest asks God to send down the Holy Spirit and sanctify the oil, that for him who is anointed it might be "unto perfect remission of his sins, and unto inheritance in the kingdom of heaven."

The prayer read by the second priest resembles the first prayer in its content. It begins with a request for healing for the sufferer, followed by numerous reminders of God's mercy and of God's love for sinners. The prayer concludes with a petition that the sins of the person receiving the sacrament may be forgiven.

The third and fourth prayers differ little from each other in content. Both contain a request that the sufferer be healed of his bodily infirmity.

The fifth prayer stands out from the other prayers read by the priests during the sacrament of unction. In its mood and content it resembles the prayer "No one who is bound"[53] from the liturgies of Basil the Great and John Chrysostom. It speaks of the Eucharist as the central aspect of the priestly ministry. From beginning to end, his entire ministry is eucharistic, and every sacrament is linked with the Eucharist. For the priest the liturgy is a source of inspiration, and he "delights" in serving it. But the Lord has not called the priest for his own personal delight. Through the liturgy the priest becomes a mediator for the people, whom God sanctifies through the sacraments performed by the priest. The grace of the priesthood, like the gift of healing, cannot be the fruit of personal merit; for, as the same prayer goes on to say, "like unto cast-off rags is all our righteousness in thy presence" (cf. Is 64.6). Hence, in this prayer the priest reminds God of his mercy, through which the sufferer is able to be healed both in spirit and in body.

In the sixth prayer, in addition to praying for the remission of the sufferer's every sin, the priest prays for himself and all those present for the sacrament. Further on in the same prayer the priest asks God to free the sufferer from eternal torment, to fill his mouth with glorification, to direct his hands unto good works and his feet to the path of preaching the gospel, and to strengthen his mind and all his bodily members by grace.

The seventh prayer of the sacrament of unction is reminiscent of one of the prayers at the sacrament of confession. It refers to repentance and liberation from the curse that may perhaps be hanging over the person.

Upon completion of the seven prayers an open Gospel book, supported by all the priests, is laid upon the head of the sick person. The senior priest reads the following prayer:

> O holy King, compassionate and all-merciful Lord Jesus Christ, Son and Word of the living God, who desirest not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live: I lay not my sinful hand upon the head of him who is come unto thee in iniquities, and asketh of thee, through us, the pardon of his sins, but thy strong and mighty hand, which is in

this, thy Holy Gospels, that is now held by my fellow-ministers, upon the head of thy servant, N. And with them I, also, beseech and entreat thy merciful compassion and love of mankind, which cherisheth no remembrance of evil, O God. . . . Do thou, the same Lord, receive also with thy wonted tender love towards mankind, this thy servant, *N.*, who repenteth him of his sore transgressions.

Before the beginning of this prayer the modern Book of Needs contains the following remark: "The principal priest, taking the book of the Holy Gospels, and opening it, shall lay it, with the writing down, on the head of the sick person, the book being held by all the priests. And the principal priest doth not lay on his hand." This remark apparently proceeds from a literal interpretation of the words, "I lay not my sinful hand." These words, however, may also be understood differently: "I lay not my sinful hand upon the head of him who is come unto thee in iniquities, but thy strong and mighty hand." These words would be entirely fitting for the priest to say while laying on his own hand.

That the laying on of hands was one means of healing the sick is affirmed by the Gospel, in the account of how Christ "laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them" (Mk 6.5). Another passage relates how all who had sick people in their homes brought them to Jesus, "and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them" (Lk 4.40). Jesus likewise healed the woman who was bent over by laying his hands on her (cf. Lk 13.13). Following the Savior's example, the apostles healed people through the laying on of hands (cf. Acts 9.17–18, 28.8).

There is indisputable proof that the laying on of hands was once a part of unction.[54] Over time, however, this was replaced with placing the open Gospel upon the head of the sick person. Here the Gospel symbolizes the hand of God, which is able both to scourge and to heal. The priest asks that the mighty right hand of God be a source of healing and forgiveness of sins for the sufferer.

The service ends with a short augmented litany, the singing of the troparia to the unmercenaries and the Theotokos, and the dismissal, at which St James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, is commemorated. After the dismissal the recipient of the sacrament addresses the priests with the words, "Bless me, holy fathers, and forgive me, a sinner."

Notes

[1] Burdock oil, sunflower oil, and other vegetable oils may also be used.

[2] Origen, *Talks on Leviticus* 2.5. Translation in *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*, Fathers of the Church 83, Gary Wayne Barkley, trans. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1990), 48.

[3] Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* 3.6; Cyril of Alexandria, *On Worship in Spirit and in Truth* 6.

[4] Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* 32.9 (*NPNF*[1] 10:217).

[5] Victor of Antioch, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* 6.13. Translation in *The* Catena in Marcum: *A Byzantine Anthology of Early Commentary on Mark*, Texts and Editions for New Testament Study 6, William R. S. Lamb, trans. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 294.

[6] Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya* [On the History of Orthodox Worship] (Kiev: Izdatelstvo imeni svyatitelya L'va, 2004), 17–18.

[7] Innocent of Rome, *Letter* 25.8.11 *To Decentius*. Translation in *The Faith of the Early Fathers, Volume 3*, William A. Jurgens, trans. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 181.

[8] Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya,* 27–30.

[9] Ibid., 180–181.

[10] Alexander Petrovsky, "K istorii posledovaniya tainstva eleosvyashcheniya" [On the History of the Order of the Sacrament of Unction], *Khristianskoe chtenie* 216.1 (1903): 44–59.

[11] Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya,* 30–33.

[12] Alexei Dmitrievsky, *Opisaniya slavyanskikh rukopisei, khranyashchikhsya v bibliotekakh pravoslavnogo Vostoka* [A Description of the Slavonic Manuscripts Kept in the Libraries of the Orthodox East] vol. 2 (Kiev–Petrograd, 1895–1917), 164–187, 197–202.

[13] Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya,* 33–38.

[14] Dmitrievsky, *Opisaniya slavyanskikh rukopisei* vol. 2, 364.

[15] Symeon of Thessalonica, *On Unction* 283 (PG 155:517AB). [Translated by the present translator.]

[16] *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent,* session 14, J. Waterworth, trans. (London: Burns and Oates, Ld., 1888), 105.

[17] *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent,* session 14, 106.

[18] Nicephorus II of Constantinople, *Against Those Who Say that Extreme Unction Should Be Given to the Dead* (PG 140:808C). [Translated by the present translator.]

[19] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2016), 378–379.

[20] Ibid., 381.

[21] Ibid.

[22] See quotes in Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo Bogosluzheniya*, 520–521.

[23] Symeon of Thessalonica, *On Unction* 287 (PG 155:521C). [Translated by the present translator.]

[24] See the section on confession, p. 138.

[25] Archbishop Veniamin (Krasnopevkov), *Novaya skrizhal'* [New Tables], 16th ed. (Saint Petersburg: I.L. Tuzov, 1899), 383–384.

[26] Dmitrievsky, *Opisanie slavyanskikh rukopisei* vol. 2, 1018.

[27] Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya,* 75–76.

[28] That is, to the church in Constantinople.

[29] A monetary unit.

[30] *Proskinitariy Arseniya Sukhanova* [The Proskinitaria of Arseny Sukhanov], 84.

[31] This is discussed in greater detail in vol. 2, p. 143.

[32] Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint John* vol. 2, 6:15.

[33] Barsanuphius and John, Letter 521. In *Barsanuphius and John: Letters* vol. 2, *Fathers of the Church* vol. 114, John Chryssavgis, trans. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 117.

[34] Ibid.,

[35] Ibid., Letter 517 (Chryssavgis, p. 115).

[36] Ibid., Letter 613 (Chryssavgis, p. 198).

[37] For more on the *Alphabetical Chapters* see *Simeon Novyy Bogoslov i pravoslavnoe predanie* [Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition] by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), 2nd ed. (Saint Petersburg: Aleteiya, 2001), 43–44.

[38] (Pseudo-)Symeon the New Theologian, *Alphabetical Chapters* 7. In Εύρισκόμενα. Σελ./*Evriskomena. Sel.*, 53–54. [Translated by the present translator.]

[39] Ibid., 7. In Εύρισκόμενα. Σελ./*Evriskomena. Sel.* 54. [Translated by the present translator.]

[40] St Ignatius (Brianchaninov), *Pis'ma k miryanam* [Letters to Laity], 506.

[41] Gregory the Theologian, *Orations* 43 (*NPNF*^{2} 7:403).

[42] Gregory the Theologian, *Orations* 7 (*NPNF*^{2} 7:231).

[43] Symeon of Thessalonica, *Answers to Gabriel of Pentapolis* (PG 155:932CD). [Translated by the present translator.]

[44] An allusion to the lighting of lamps at the beginning of the rite.

[45] Symeon of Thessalonica, *On the Sacraments* (56) (PG 155:205BC). [Translated by the present translator.]

[46] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press Classics 1 (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 123–125.

[47] Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya,* 90–95.

[48] Ibid., 106–107.

[49] Ibid., 95.

[50] Ibid., 215–216.

[51] From evils and illnesses.

[52] Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition* 5.1–2.

[53] The prayer of the cherubic hymn.—*Trans.*

[54] Venedikt (Alentov), *K istorii pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya,* 144–147.