

CHAPTER 8

HOLY UNCTION: THE MYSTERY OF DIVINE HEALING

A. Definition and Main Purpose

In the mystery of holy unction, the faithful Christian who is sick receives invisibly, through the anointing with consecrated oil and the accompanying prayers of the priests, the grace of healing or of the easing of his bodily pains, the grace of spiritual strengthening, and the forgiveness of those sins he has committed since his last confession. The practice of this sacrament in the time of the apostles, and hence its origin from Christ Himself through the apostles, is attested in the Epistle of James: "Is any among you sick? 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 will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (Jas 5:14–15).

One of the principal causes for human depression and discouragement is sickness, and very frequently neither sickness nor depression can be overcome by using human means alone. The believer who is sick is tormented also by his awareness that his sickness may have an additional cause in certain sins that he has not been able to confess, or that he may even eventually die without having these sins forgiven. Is there anyone who at some point in his life has not passed through sickness and through these depressions and anxieties that increase his suffering? They make up part of the reality of our human existence.

Can we possibly believe that God has given no thought to some help that might be given to human beings in these situations of illness and spiritual weakness? The mystery of holy unction shows that God, faced with those who are suffering and who put their hope in Him and call out to Him when sickness touches them, shows them His mercy. Hence in all the prayers of this mystery, appeal is made especially to the mercy of God, and God appears in this sacrament as the “Physician” at His work and filled with compassion. In the antiphon of the canticle of Arsenius, from the service of the consecration of the oil with which the sick person is anointed—an antiphon that is repeated after each troparion—this prayer is made: “Lord Christ, have mercy on Your servants.” Likewise, in the intonation for the fourth tone, the text reads, “Physician and help of those in pain . . . grant healing to Your afflicted servants; pity and show mercy to those who have erred grievously and absolve them, Christ, of their failings.”¹

Sometimes the grace of God works more or less directly on the body of the sick person and brings about his healing, although even in such a case the strengthening of soul and the forgiveness of the person’s sins also take place. At other times the healing is produced more through the strengthening of the powers of the soul or again through the forgiveness of sins that have not been confessed, although this necessarily strengthens the soul too, and through it the body. Nevertheless, what is principally given through the grace of this mystery is the healing of the body. It is only when it has been established that the sick person is in fact dying that bodily healing is no longer the principal effect or purpose of the sacrament but only the others.

This mystery can be considered as the mystery of the body *par excellence*, or the mystery established for the purpose of bringing health back to the body. Through it the positive value attributed by God to the human body is strongly emphasized, for God Himself assumed a body and keeps it for all eternity, saving us by means of it and through it imparting to us the very life of God.

In the prayer that is recited after the second readings from the Epistle and the Gospel, Christ is asked to grant the sick person return to health based on the fact that He assumed human form and “became created for the sake of the creature,”² demonstrating His will to save the body and to raise it up to the Kingdom of God, to make of the body a means of an eternal communion between God and the human race.

Hence in the same prayer the Holy Spirit is asked to take up His dwelling in the sick person, in keeping with the words of St. Paul: "Loving Master, look down from Your holy sanctuary on high, and at this hour draw us together, sinners and unworthy servants, under the sheltering grace of the Holy Spirit. Abide in these Your people"³ (cf. 1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19). The Holy Spirit is symbolized and communicated by means of the oil that the priests consecrate in the course of this mystery's celebration, oil with which the sick person is anointed.

B. Secondary Purpose

Human existence is something unspeakably complex. As long as a man lives, there is no possible way of separating body and soul, and hence there can be no separation either between the working of grace in the body and its working in the soul. The very healing of the body is felt by the sick person as a grace given to him as an integral human person. The body is full of the energies of the soul; through it the soul works, and without it the soul cannot work. Hence grace does not work upon the body without also working upon the soul, but as it works upon the soul—strengthening it, purifying it of sin, and thus calming its conscience—these works in turn have a fortifying effect upon the body too, making it an instrument of the soul's activity on behalf of the good and a source of strength for the soul.

In the prayers of this mystery, therefore, a number of things are asked for simultaneously: the healing of the body, the forgiveness of sins, and the cleansing of the soul from sin. The indwelling of the Spirit has as its special purpose the purification from sin, the healing of the passions, and the raising up of man to a life of holiness and unspotted service of God. Insofar as sin is a sickness of the soul, especially when it has grown into a habitual passion and as such has become a cause of the body's sickness, holy unction is deemed to be a healing of the body as much as of the soul; in the sacrament, God is called "physician of our souls and bodies."⁴ Holy unction is considered a necessity also for the healing of these deeply rooted passions, for even if the sins that proceed from them or that have produced them have been confessed, the disordered passions themselves cannot be healed as easily as that, and it is impossible that new sinful acts will not spring forth from them almost continuously.

The insistence with which prayer is offered in this sacrament for the sick person's healing from the passions of the soul alongside his bodily healing, an insistence that is far greater than that found in the mystery of repentance, makes us understand that the mystery of holy unction has a special reference to these roots of sin. Ultimately, sinfulness comes down to this advanced stage of man's sinful weaknesses, a stage that results from disregarding both the mystery of repentance and the collaboration with the grace received in baptism and chrismation that is required of a Christian. The confession of sins that the sick person makes prior to receiving the holy unction has brought him the forgiveness of the sins confessed. However, he has not had time, through a collaboration with the grace that he has once again received, to melt away the mass of his sinful weaknesses (nourished as these have been by long-standing habits of sin), weaknesses that are themselves often the explanation for his bodily illness. Or perhaps in his confession the sick man was not able to give any clear description of these weaknesses, which often are lost within a fog of undefined vagueness.

Furthermore, just as it is not possible to make a separation between the body and the soul, it is equally impossible, when dealing with the human being as a whole, to separate the influence that visible phenomena have upon him from the influence exercised by the invisible forces of evil. Freedom from these visible influences takes place when the bodily senses are strengthened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, who enters into the senses when they are anointed with the consecrated oil. In this way the very senses of the body in themselves are cleansed, sanctified, and fortified against the temptations that come from exterior things, and also from the invisible forces of evil that are at work through these things.

The prayers of the mystery of holy unction, therefore, ask God simultaneously for bodily healing, forgiveness of sins, cure of the disordered passions, freedom from evil influences over the senses, and the driving away of the Enemy; all these petitions are offered so that the sick person can regain health in body and soul, and live a pure life dedicated to the service of God. This demonstrates that the mystery of holy unction does not have death in view, as in Catholicism, but life: a life lived in health and holiness.

The activity of the Holy Spirit in human beings, which is what is prayed for and imparted through the mystery of holy unction, could

not take effect, however, were there no opening of the soul through faith and repentance on the part of those who are sick. With regard to faith, some reflection is necessary as to why no confession of faith is asked for from the sick person who receives this sacrament. A confession of faith is asked for in baptism, which is united with chrismation, and also in the Eucharist; a confession of sins is required alongside a confession of faith in the mystery of repentance. In the case of holy unction, however, the priests have solid grounds for considering that this confession of faith can be taken as something already made, just as the bishop does in the case of those to be ordained deacons or priests, on the basis of their certificates of theological preparation and their sacramental confessions prior to ordination; or in the case of those being married, on the basis of their prior exchange of consent. The very fact that the sick person has called the priests to pray for him implies his faith that God is at work through this mystery. Normally, moreover, the person has gone to confession beforehand. Indeed, the sick person shows a marked sensibility toward God by this act of recognizing his own personal human incapacity, and that of man in general, and of placing his highest hope in God. God becomes more transparent to the sick person through the medium of his bodily weakness, and hence the priest relies on the faith and penitence of the sick person and prays to God for His healing power and purifying grace.

The following texts from the prayers of the service of holy unction illustrate and firmly establish these purposes implicit in the mystery and also the opening up of the sick person to them.

In the prayer already cited above, which follows the reading of the second Gospel and which prays for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the sick person, the priest says that such persons are “aware of their own failings, yet draw near in faith. Accepting them in Your compassion, whether they have transgressed in word or deed or thought, forgive them, and purge them of all guilt. Abiding in them, preserve them the rest of their lives, so that they may no longer be an object of joy for the Evil One, and that in them Your all-holy name may be glorified.”⁵ Already before this petition, prayer had been made for the bodily healing of the sick person.

In one of the odes sung before the consecration of the oil, this Petition is made: “Look down from heaven in Your loving-kindness, infinite One, and by Your unseen hand seal our senses, loving Lord.

To those who turn to You seeking remission of sins, grant healing of soul and body, through Your holy Oil, so that they may glorify You wholeheartedly, magnifying Your might.”⁶ The priest anoints the primary senses of the sick person with oil in the sign of the cross, while the significance of the cross is shown through a hymn that is chanted as the priest is performing the anointing: “O Lord, You gave us Your cross as a weapon against the devil, who shakes and trembles, unable to stand the sight of its power; for You have raised the dead and destroyed death.”⁷ Through the sign of the cross, Christ Himself, the one sacrificed, comes to dwell in the sick person, imparting the power to abstain from sin and to resist any selfishness that comes from our sinful impulses; with this power the soul of the sick person will be strengthened so that it can overcome the sickness of the body. The cross is the means by which power comes from the body of Christ, who conquered death. And against the action of the invisible powers, prayer is offered to gain the invisible assistance of the saints, the martyrs, and the Mother of the Lord.

It should also be noted that normally the mystery of holy unction is celebrated with the participation of a good number of the faithful, who join their prayers with those of the priests. From this broader communion and from this demonstration of love that so many of his neighbors give to the sick man in his state of illness and incapacity, the sick person likewise draws the strength to recover in both body and spirit. In the celebration of this mystery, the truth of Khomiakov’s dictum is proved once again: “We know that when any one of us falls he falls alone; but no one is saved alone. He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her, and in unity with all her other members . . . All the angels pray for us, the apostles, martyrs, and patriarchs, and above them all, the Mother of our Lord.”⁸

The very fact that this mystery is celebrated by a number of priests together (ideally by seven, but at least by two) shows the will of the Church to set in motion large numbers of her forces, through their communion in love and prayer, and to put many persons into action so that one of her members might escape from the helpless and painful condition in which he finds himself. It is especially in times of sickness that human beings stand in need of sympathy and communion, and it is particularly then that we can see how true it is that a man draws strength from the love shown by many other people.

However, this communion provides strength to the sick person not merely through what is human about it but foremost because all those who come and enter into communion with their sick neighbor come with faith in Christ. And it is Christ who overcame every sickness and helplessness, who conquered death, who cured some men by means of the prayers of others, and who said that where two or three were gathered together in His name—that is, with faith in Him and with mutual love for one another—He Himself was there in the midst of them (Matt 18:20). These neighbors help the sick person only because they, through their faith and prayers, make the presence and the power of Christ something transparent and active; only because they facilitate the communion that the sick person has with Christ through his faith, a faith their own faith helps to strengthen.

As in all the mysteries, so too in the mystery of holy unction communion with the priest and with the other believers helps us to enter into communion with Christ. In the preceding pages we have provided the necessary details regarding the mystery's constitutive elements: the priests as celebrants; the recipient of the sacrament; the consecrated oil; the priest's use of his hand to anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord; and the openness of the sick person, through faith and repentance, to the grace that heals illnesses of both body and soul, a grace that imparts to him the forgiveness of sins.

The members of the body are anointed seven times in the form of the cross, after the reading of the seven Gospel and Epistle passages and after the recitation of the seven prayers. This is because seven are the gifts of the Holy Spirit and seven is the number of the evil spirits expelled from the sinful woman (Luke 8:2), for the number seven symbolizes the totality of the forms of evil (Luke 11:26), but also of the gifts of God. After the number seven comes the number eight, which is the symbol of eternal rest and blessedness.

The whole service of the mystery reveals an insistence that the illness of body and soul into which the sick person has fallen makes him unfit for normal life or threatens him with the end of his earthly life. Through the power of Christ, he must be helped in a persistent way to become healthy in body and soul, or at least in soul, if his death appears to be imminent.

The Church makes a maximum effort to prepare a sick person for communion with Christ and to open him up to communion with his

brothers and sisters for several reasons: because our salvation consists in communion with Christ, the all-loving divine Person who has become man; and because it would be possible for such a person to pass from his present sickness into death while lacking, due to his disordered passions, the capacity to enter into that communion because he has made no progress in it through the other mysteries and through his active collaboration with their graces. In effect this maximum effort toward the sick person is made in order to lead him to salvation. To this end the Church uses many priests; many prayers; and many fellow believers, all praying together, open to communion with Christ and longing to strengthen their communion with the one who is sick.