
THE MYSTERY OF HOLY UNCTION WORK OF THE CHURCH

Simion Todoran*

'1 Decembrie 1918' University of Alba Iulia, 5 Gabriel Bethlen Str., 510009, Alba Iulia, Romania

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Abstract

The man who is overwhelmed by the suffering of illness can no longer rejoice in his life or take part in the life of his fellow creatures. Weakened by suffering, he cannot work any more, and thus he becomes dependent on the others around him. Through the Mystery of Holy Unction, God's grace works upon the sick person in many ways, strengthening hope in his soul, healing his suffering, restoring his trust, and comforting the ones who brought him to the service. The Mystery of Holy Unction does not replace medical treatment. Through Holy Unction, all kinds of sins are forgiven. For it is easy to say: take up your mat and go up to your house, but it is hard to forgive sins that paralyse man's will, oppress the heart, and trouble the mind. Or, the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins (Matthew 9.1-7).

The sick person who is faithful is tormented by the recognition that his illness is caused by sins he did not confess, and that he will die without the remission of these sins.

Keywords: Church, sick person, suffering, illness, grace

1. What is the origin of the Mystery of the Holy Unction?

As all God's works for salvation, the Mystery of Holy Unction was prophesied in the Old Testament in connection with the person of the Messiah. "He bears our sins and is pained for us" (Isaiah 53.4). "You shall sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be purified; you shall wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow" (Psalm 50.8). In the Old Testament, God made Himself known to the righteous not only as the One that exists – "I am the Being" (Exodus 3.14), but also as "Jehovah-Rapha", "I am the Lord your God that *heals* you" (Exodus 15.26).

In the psalms of the Old Testament there are examples of prayers for the sick asking God for healing. "Pity me, O Lord, for I am weak; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are in torment. My soul also is grievously troubled; but you, O Lord, how long?" (Psalm 6.2-3) This represents an example of a direct request for the healing of the body and soul, expressed out of suffering. The Lord is the only One Who can offer healing for the sick. It is interesting that the sick are not

* E-mail: simion_todoran@yahoo.com

only before God, but also before the community of the believers (Psalm 30). Moreover, the sick pray and praise the Lord in a fashion that suggests that there was a service by which the community, through its priests, took care of the sick and regarded their trial as belonging to the whole community [1].

In the religious and social life of the Hebrew people, comforting the sufferings of the body and of the soul, on the one hand, and healing the sick, on the other hand, were obtained from the God of salvation or from divine inspiration. Just like all the peoples in the East, the Hebrews used oil in order to heal the sick. On feasts, the Hebrews were anointed with oil (according to Amos 6.6). The anointing was forbidden as a sign of mourning, being resumed after the mourning period was over (Daniel 10.3; II Kings 14.2; Judith 10.3).

In the Old Testament, the oil served as a means of consecration, according to the teaching given by God to Moses and the other prophets. Thus, Holy Scripture shows that oil, specially prepared, was used for the sacrifices without blood, for the consecration of the objects used in worship (the tabernacle, the altar for the sacrifice), for the consecration of priests (Aaron and his sons, and later all the priests in the Old Law), the consecration of kings (Saul, David, and Solomon) and the consecration of prophets (Elisha). Thus, Jacob poured oil on the Bethel stone (Genesis 28.18), and the same was done in the case of the ark of the covenant and the objects involved in worship (Exodus 30:26); the high priest and the other servants had their heads anointed with oil (Leviticus 8.30) [2].

The Holy Land was famous for ‘balsamic remedies’ that possessed miraculous efficiency. It is known that on the second journey to Egypt of Jacob’s sons, their father advised them to take to Joseph, who had not yet revealed his identity, something from the ‘fruits of the Earth’, specifying the gum, the ‘*balsamic remedy*’: “carry down to the man presents of *gum* and honey and frankincense and stacte and turpentine and walnuts” (Genesis 43.11).

In Israel there were times of spiritual drought, of misbelief and sinfulness, when the gift of the healings from above, of the heavenly ‘balsamic remedy’ was absent, annihilated. Jeremiah observes this and wonders: “The summer is gone, the harvest is past and we are not saved. For the breach of the daughter of my people I have been saddened; in my perplexity pangs have seized upon me as of a woman in labour. And is there no balm in Gilead, or is there no physician there? Why has not the healing of the daughter of my people taken place?” (Jeremiah 8.20-22).

When there is no balm left in Gilead, God has it, for He is patient and merciful. Both in the Old and in the New Testament, those who repent for their sins and amend themselves can be offered the water of joy: “Draw you therefore water with joy out of the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12.3).

1.1. The New Testament

Anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and with power, our Saviour Jesus Christ went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him (Acts 10.38). The whole Messianic activity of our Lord Jesus

Christ was a blessed effusion of the Holy Spirit and grace, of heavenly balm, life force, and healing power. The Holy Gospels present many examples of the interest our Lord Jesus Christ has shown in suffering humanity. In the Gospel according to Mark it says: “They swarmed that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard that he was. Wherever he entered, into villages, cities or into the country, people laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him to be able to touch just the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched him were made well.” (Mark 6.55-56).

The sick that addressed the apostles were cured in the name of Jesus Christ, and their healing signifies the presence and work of the resurrected Jesus: “These signs will accompany those who believe; they will cast out demons in my Name; they will speak with new languages; they will take up snakes, and if they drink anything deadly, it will in no way hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” (Mark 16.17-18)

The wonderful healings brought many people to the faith in Jesus Christ (John 11.45). The power of healing was given to the Holy Apostles by Jesus Christ. In the Gospel according to Mark we find that Jesus, returning to his country, was regarded with distrust, but “laid his hands on a few people and healed them” (Mark 6.5). Then he called the twelve and “began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits” (Mark 6.7). Consequently, the Holy Apostles “cast out many demons and anointed with oil many people who were sick and healed them” (Mark 6.13) [3].

Oil was recognised as a healing medium since ancient times [Joseph Flavius, *Războiul iudaic*, 1, 657]. Here, it is mentioned not only as medicine, but also as a “means of transmitting divine power” [4], which has “a mysterious meaning” [5] and by which means it was already used in the first community in the case of the sick [6]. Anointing the sick with oil is mentioned only in the pericopes from Mark and James 5.14, where it is connected not only to the healing of the body, but also with the remission of sins. The correlation of the two pericopes is made by Saint Theophylact, who enumerates afterwards the good results of oil (“of good use for pains and a source of light and messenger of joy”) [7].

The consequence of the anointment was healing. The Apostles healed following the example of their Master, not as doctors, but as thaumaturges; they used oil, which He never used, as far as we know. There is certainly a nuance here. One might say that, by using an established remedy, they do not make possible a supernatural healing every time, and Mark tells us that not all the sick were healed.

Towards the end of the second century, we learn from Tertullian that a Christian named Proculus Tarpakion anointed with oil the father of the emperor Antoninus Pius, who was really a pagan [Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, 4, 5, available at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ante-Nicene_Fathers/Volume_III/Apologetic/To_Scapula]. This shows that in the first two centuries in the ritual mentioned by Saint James there had not been any changes. Probably there was no special blessing of this oil, only a prayer of the priests for the sick. The text of Saint

James makes us understand that the priests of the Church were called to the sick person's house. This text also mentions that the sick were anointed with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of the Church aims at the healing of the body and of the soul, given the fact that man was understood actually as a sick existence, both in the soul and in the body.

1.2. Other testimonies

The Canons of Hippolytus contain some useful indications referring to care for the sick. In his Canons, the oil for the sick is especially blessed on Great Thursday [8].

In *Testamentum Domini* (fifth century) there are other testimonies about the existence of Holy Unction. It seems that the oil was blessed for the healing of the sick and for the blessing of those who repent, approaching the anointing with faith. The blessing of the oil is done by the priest, who places the vessel with the oil next to the Holy Table [8]. This denotes the connection of the blessing of the oil with the Holy Eucharist, or the fact that the blessing of the oil was done during the Divine Liturgy.

The apostolic tradition at the beginning of the third century recommends that the bishop bless *the mystic oil of the work of grace*. There was another oil, kept separately from the first; the bishop had to exorcize the evil spirits, and it was called *the exorcized oil*. A deacon carried it, and he had to stand to the left of the priest, whereas another deacon, carrying the mystic oil, had to stand to the right of the priest. There was also *the oil of the invalids (of the sick)*, which was blessed on Great Thursday. It was used for the Mystery of Holy Unction (East) and for Extreme Unction (West).

The *Euchologion* of Serapion of Thmuis from the fourth century mentions two prayers for the oil: one of these belongs to a whole series of prayers that were part of the liturgy, the liturgical Sacrifice, and it is as follows: "Offering of oils and waters. We bless through the name of thy only-begotten Jesus Christ these creatures, we name the name of him who suffered, who was crucified, and rose again, and who sitteth on the right hand of the uncreated upon this water and upon this [oil]. Grant healing power upon these creatures that every fever and every evil spirit and every spirit may depart through the drinking and the anointing, and that the partaking of these creatures may be a healing medicine, and a medicine of soundness in the name of thy only-begotten Jesus Christ, through whom to thee (is) the glory and the strength in holy Spirit to all the ages of the ages. Amen." [9]

A second prayer for the sick was uttered after the blessing of the faithful, when hands were laid upon them. This prayer asks for God's help: "rebuke the sicknesses: raise up those that are lying down" [9]. In this case it is not Holy Unction, but vessels with water and oil placed before the bishop, who blesses them and offers them for the use of the sick; these were to sprinkle the houses and the sick with blessed water and anoint the bodies of the sick with the blessed oil, so that illnesses are cured and demons are cast from their houses. However,

he mentions that the anointing of the sick is for “remission of sins and for health and soundness of soul, body, spirit” [9].

The Apostolic Constitutions present us with a similar practice in Syria at the beginning of fifth century. They say: “Let the bishop bless the water, or the oil. Let him say thus: O Lord of hosts, the God of powers, the creator of the waters, and the supplier of oil, who art compassionate, and a lover of mankind, who hast given water for drink and for cleansing, and oil to give man a cheerful and joyful countenance; do Thou now also sanctify this water and this oil through Your Christ, in the name of him or her that has offered them, and grant them a power to restore health, to drive away diseases, to banish demons, and to disperse all snares through Christ our hope, with whom glory, honour, and worship be to You, and to the Holy Ghost, for ever. Amen.” The practice includes psalm 50, seven antiphons, seven prayers, seven litanies uttered before “Holy God...” followed by the Holy Liturgy.

The process of development of the service of Holy Unction started in the eighth century and continued, reaching today’s form in the XIIIth century. The custom mentioned in the XIth century for seven priests to celebrate the service was sanctified by ecumenical patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos (1255-1260), as we are informed by his successor Nikephoros II (1260-1261). It is said that patriarch Arsenios is the one who established most of the ritual of Holy Unction as we have it today. From the information left by Nikephoros II, the author of the canon of Holy Unction is not patriarch Arsenios, but the metropolitan of Kerkyra, whose name was Arsenios, too, who lived in the Xth century [10]. During the time of patriarch Arsenios, the ritual of Holy Unction was united with the Holy Liturgy. It was performed seven days in a row, every day by a different priest.

In the XIIIth century, Holy Unction began to be performed separately from the Holy Liturgy, having its own ritual, united with Matins.

At the end of the XIVth century and the beginning of the XVth century, Saint Symeon, archbishop of Thessaloniki (+1429), said that Holy Unction was the mystery offered to us for the remission of sins, for our healing and for the offering of the divine mercifulness [11]. The Saint mentions the custom for Holy Unction to be celebrated by seven priests, highlighting the symbolism that the number seven had in the Old Testament (perfection), giving in this respect several examples from the Old Testament. He deems it also acceptable for this Mystery to be celebrated by three priests (according to the name of the Holy Trinity), just as it can also be celebrated by more than seven priests, but it ought not to be celebrated by only one priest [12]. Saint Symeon disapproves of the Western practice, according to which Unction was only administered to the dying, in as far as “the Holy Unction is for the living so as to live and remain clean, and not for the living to die and not rise again from suffering” [13]. He also gives evidence that in the practice of the Eastern Church there existed the ritual of anointing the dead, but this is not to be mistaken for Holy Unction. In that case, the oil was not the blessed oil used for the anointing of the sick.

In the *Sacramentalium* (euchologion) of pope Gelasius and of pope Gregory the Great there is another formula for the blessing of the oil, namely: “From your holy heaven, send, Lord, Your Holy Spirit, the Comforter, upon this oil of olives that you allowed to be taken out of this strong tree in order to offer our body health, so that, through Your holy blessing to be a medicine for the body and the soul of whoever is anointed with it, or tastes or touches it, so that it cast all pain, weakness and sickness from the body.” [14]

In his *Epistle 25* addressed to Decentius Eugubinus, in chapter 8, pope Innocent I offers a series of details related to Holy Unction: the anointing with oil was part of the category of the services called *sacraments*; the anointing with blessed oil (named here *chrism*) can be offered to all believers, not only to the dying, but to every sick person; the ones who had the authority to bless the oil were both the bishops and the priests; the anointing could be done by bishops and priests, but also by any faithful [14].

1.3. Patristic testimonies

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons highlights that the ceremony of Gnosticism upon the dead is a *contorted* ceremony of Holy Unction in the ancient Christian Church.

Origen refers directly to the Mystery of Holy Unction. He connects Unction to Confession, as ways of forgiving sins. “There is a seventh way of forgiving sins, a difficult and cumbersome one, when the sinner washes his bed in tears and tears become for him his bread night and day and when he is not ashamed to reveal his sin before the priest of God and asks for forgiveness from Him.” [10, p. 6] Origen clearly states that the healing is of the body and of the soul: “The simple invocation of the name of Jesus that the true believers uttered healed many sick of the unclean spirits and of other sufferings.” [10, p. 6]

It must be mentioned that even if he referred to Holy Unction in connection with Confession, Origen distinguishes between the two Holy Mysteries of the Church. Elsewhere, he refers to confession, but makes no connection to Holy Unction. In the same work we quoted before, Origen says: “Each soul needs the oil of divine mercifulness and no one can leave this life if he does not have the oil of heavenly grace” [10, p. 6]

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (second century) lists among the responsibilities of the clerics that of visiting the sick: “Let the presbyters be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick and not neglecting the widow, the orphan or the poor” [12, p. 6] From this text we cannot draw the conclusion that the obligation of priests to visit the sick involved necessarily any prayer or liturgical act.

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (+254) refers to the existence of the practice of laying hands on the sick in order to give health to the suffering [13]. Eusebius of Caesarea mentions the healing power of the touch of Jesus: “As soon as Christ touches something with his divine and incorporeal touch, he necessarily gives

life and shares His spiritual light...all illnesses, sicknesses and pains disappear, offering in exchange something from His perfection” [14].

Saint Ambrosius sees in the Mystery of Holy Unction “the sick’s hope of recovery” [Saint Ambrosius of Milan, *De Poenitentia*, 1, 8]. Blessed Augustine regards this Mystery of the Church as the last consolation before leaving for the afterlife. Saint Basil the Great has a prayer for the sick, which later became part of the ritual of Holy Unction.

Saint John Chrysostom in *On the priesthood* makes a remark referring to the Mystery of Holy Unction. Saint Caesar of Arles (470-543) referred to Holy Unction in four sermons: 13, 50, 52, and 184.

1.4. Venerable Bede

We would also like to present the point of view of a great theologian from the period before the great schism of the Church. This is Bede, a man of great erudition in the Anglo-Saxon world. Born in Ireland in 673, he was one of the great scholars of the Irish monasteries. He died in 735 in the monastery of Jarrow. He was considered not only the greatest man of letters in the Ireland of his time, but also a theologian. In the commentary of the Gospel according to Mark, commenting on the sixth chapter, verses 12-13, Bede refers to the anointing with oil of the sick by the Apostles, specifying that: “It is obvious that this tradition of the Church is a commandment of the Apostles, which consists in anointing the possessed by evil spirits or the sick with blessed oil through the blessing of the bishop.” [15] From this commentary we understand that in the Irish tradition there was the conviction that the practice of the anointment with blessed oil was considered of apostolic origin and that the oil had to be blessed by the bishop. We understand that the beneficiaries of this anointing were all categories of sick, including the ones possessed by evil spirits.

2. The oil – the material of Holy Unction

The material is the oil. Its healing effect had been known for a long time, a fact demonstrated by the existence of the practice of anointing with oil in the case of many ancient pagan religions. In the case of the oil used as material for the Mystery of Holy Unction, it is a symbol of human mercy and also a medicine, a way of healing, used as such since ancient times. The oil for Unction, being blessed by the priests with the invocation of God, is holy, full of the divine gift of the Holy Spirit, just like the water of baptism. It has the power to purify the soul through the remission of sins, and to heal the body through the annihilation of illnesses, offering God’s mercy and clemency.

Professor Dumitru Stăniloae affirms that: “God’s grace works more or less directly upon the body, healing it, even though, in this case the strengthening of the soul and the remission of sins of the sick also occur. Other times, the healing occurs more through the strengthening of the soul’s powers or

through the remission of the hidden sins, so that it strengthens the soul and through the soul, the body.” [16]

As material of the Mystery of Holy Unction, the oil had no power, if it had not been conferred to it by **the sanctifying power of prayer**. In the prayer after the second Epistle and the second Gospel, Christ is asked to offer healing for the sick, “on the ground that He became a created being for the sake of his creatures, revealing his will of saving the body and raising it in the Kingdom of God, of making the bodies a means of eternal communion between God and men” [16, p. 7]. But what is most important is the deep faith with which the prayers are uttered by the priests and the echo they have in the souls of the participants. There is chemistry here, this is the syntagm used nowadays, and it is something much deeper than the recitation of a poem. The Holy Spirit is invoked to bless the oil. The words burn the lips of the priests, and their warmth softens the souls of the believers. In these conditions, the Holy Spirit descends and performs His blessing work. The greatness and the sublimity of the Mystery are given by the greatness and sublimity of the worship and communion created in the Church. If it is not so, it cannot be a Mystery, it cannot be a healing, but a well-established ritualism, consisting of poems and songs on a religious topic.

The grace of God works on the sick in many ways, healing his suffering, “giving back the hope and peace to those who brought him to the service” [17].

3. The priest – the one who performs the Holy Mysteries

Let them call for the presbyters of the Church... teaches Saint James the Apostle. The reason is that in the Church, the priest is the head of a community, the leader of the family, of his spiritual flock. He lives and serves not only for himself, thus he becomes righteous before God [18].

The work of the priest is holy because worshipping by words is closely interwoven with the power of performing the Holy Mysteries. Saint Paul the Apostle never separated the apostolic mission of preaching the Gospel from the sacerdotal mission; he was endowed with sacerdotal power to the greatest extent.

The Mystery of Holy Unction includes a few main elements:

1. Confession, because the remission of sins is at the origin of the healing of the illness. The sin and suffering go together, just as the soul and the body are inseparable in human nature. Dying to sin through repentance means rebuilding the pivot that lies at the root of life and of humanity.
2. The reading of the seven biblical pericopes from the Epistles and the Gospels means that the healing act is not a medical intervention or a miraculous healing, but an act of compassion of God, ‘the physician of souls and bodies...and by Whose bruises we all have been healed’.
3. Seven prayers for the blessing of the oil, accompanied by a similar number of anointing of the sick by the priests for health and deliverance from all illnesses. The oil is a symbol of the divine mercy, of joy and holiness. All these represent the plenitude of the Church, where just like in an organism,

all the members suffer when a member suffers (according to I Corinthians 12.26) [19].

4. Conclusions

The necessity of the Mystery of Holy Unction. Through her Mysteries, the Church offers divine grace to those who want salvation with pure faith and especially more to those who suffer because of known and unknown sins, which hurt the soul and are manifest through illnesses in the body. For the suffering of the body is also the direct result of numerous and major sins. And if a member is sick, all the members suffer (Matthew 6.22-23, I Corinthians 12.26).

Regarded from the point of view of belonging to the work of the Church, the Mystery of Holy Unction appears as a mystery complementary to Confession [20]. It is accompanied by prayer and is done in the name of the Lord. It is a religious act whose remedy is not only physical, but also moral [21].

The Mystery of Holy Unction is a holy work performed in the name of the Holy Trinity, by the priests of the Church, through which the sick faithful are given the invisible grace of healing or ameliorating physical suffering, strengthening of the soul, regaining hope, and remission of sins. The visible part consists in anointing the sick with blessed oil after special prayers of invocation of God's mercy through the power of the Holy Spirit. The immediate purpose of the Mystery is the remission of sins and the relief of the suffering caused by sins. "Sin no more, so that nothing worse may happen to you" (John 5.14). And even if the sick person dies, the effect of the Mystery will act upon the soul if he did not fall into despair, bringing relief at the hour of death and peace for the people close to the sick, and at the Last Judgment each will have his reward according to his deeds (Matthew 25.37-40).

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