

Preparation and Consecration of Chrism

THE ORDERS OF PREPARATION and consecration of chrism are inseparably linked to the sacrament of chrismation, and they cannot be discussed in isolation from this sacrament. In and of themselves these service orders are vividly sacramental in nature. We should note that among the six sacraments Dionysius the Areopagite lists not chrismation (which in his understanding is a part of the sacrament of baptism), but specifically “the sacrament of the consecration of chrism.” He describes the service order for this “sacrament” in the following words:

In the same way as in the Synaxis, the orders of the imperfect¹ are dismissed, that is, after the Bishop has made the whole circuit of the temple, attended with fragrant incense, and the chanting of the Psalms, and the reading of the most Divine Lectures. Then the Hierarch takes the Myrrh² and places it upon the Divine Altar, veiled under twelve sacred wings, whilst all cry aloud, with a devout voice, the sacred melody of the inspiration of the God-rapt Prophets. When the Bishop has finished the prayer offered over it,³ he uses it in the most holy perfectings of things that are hallowed, for the completion of almost every Hierarchal function.⁴

Thus, the order of consecration included a censuring, the singing of psalms, the reading of holy scripture (the Gospel), the placing of a vessel of chrism on the altar (the holy table), and a prayer at the consecration of chrism to the singing of “Alleluia.”⁵ The Areopagite speaks of using chrism “for the perfecting of every religious function”;⁶ in particular, he says, “the sacred consecration of the Divine Altar [is completed] by pure effusions of the most holy Myrrh.”⁷ We know that in the fifth century chrism was used more broadly than in the Orthodox Church today. It was used not only for the conse-

cration of a church (anointing the four walls of the church with chrism is a part of the order of consecration of a church to this day) and the holy table (this tradition has likewise survived), but also of the blessing of icons (a tradition that has fallen into disuse).

However, the primary purpose of preparing and consecrating chrism is for the bestowal of the gift of the Holy Spirit upon one who has received baptism:

The completing gift and grace of the Divine regeneration is completed in the Divine perfecting of the Myrrh. Hence, as I think, the Hierarch pouring the Myrrh upon the purifying font, in the form of a cross, brings to view for contemplative eyes Jesus descending to death itself through the cross, for our birth in God, and drawing up from the jaws of a destructive death, by the same Divine and resistless descent, those who, according to the mysterious saying, “are baptized into His death,” from the former gulf of a destructive death, and renewing them to a godly and eternal existence. But further, the perfecting unction of the Myrrh gives to him who has been initiated in the most sacred initiation of the birth in God, the indwelling of the supremely Divine Spirit; the sacred imagery of the symbols suggesting, as I think, the gift of the Divine Spirit, by Him Who for our sakes has been sanctified as man,⁸ by the Divine Spirit, in an unaltered condition of His essential Godhead.⁹

Thus, the Areopagite directly links the consecration of chrism with the sacrament of chrismation. The Areopagite sees the ritual of the cruciform pouring of chrism into the baptismal font (retained in modern practice in the crosswise form of anointing the baptismal water with blessed oil) as an allusion to Christ’s descent into the waters of the Jordan.

The orders of preparing and consecrating myrrh in the usage of the Orthodox Church retain the chief aspects of the ritual described by Dionysius the Areopagite. In current practice, however, preparing chrism is the prerogative not of every bishop, but only of the heads of local Orthodox churches.¹⁰ The ruling diocesan bishops of a local church obtain chrism from the primate of that

church, and parish priests obtain it from their diocesan bishop. Thus, through the bishops and the priests the blessing of the primate of each local church is bestowed upon every believer.



Patriarchal moleben before beginning the preparation of chrism

Chrism consists of a fragrant compound of a number of aromatic substances—plant oils, sweet smelling herbs, and fragrant resins. In the preparation of chrism only naturally occurring elements may be used. In the Russian Orthodox Church chrism is prepared from olive oil, white grape wine, and various fragrant substances such as frankincense; rose petals; violet, spice, and tormentil root; and nutmeg, rose, lemon, and clove oil. The list of elements and their quantities have never been strictly established. In 1671 and 1681 fifty-three elements were used in the preparation of chrism; in 1691, fifty-five; and in 1894, fifty. Currently chrism includes about forty different substances.¹¹

The orders of the preparation and consecration of chrism are served once a year or every few years, as needed. The elements from which the chrism is prepared are brought to the church during the third week of Great Lent (the week of the veneration of

the cross). On Wednesday all the prepared elements are sprinkled with holy water, after which part of the oil is mixed with wine and cooked in a kettle. The cooked oil is poured over the fragrant substances, which have been finely ground, and they are left to steep for two weeks. On Wednesday of the sixth week of Lent the oil is poured off into vessels, and wine is poured over the substances.

The order of the preparation of chrism lasts for several days, and concludes during Holy Week. On Great Monday the patriarch or (with his blessing) another bishop, with other clergy concelebrating, performs the rite of the lesser blessing of water and reads the prayer at the beginning of the preparation of chrism. The prepared elements and the kettle are sprinkled with holy water, the patriarch pours a little holy water into the kettle, and the clergy pour in oil and wine. The patriarch blesses the kettle and lights the fire beneath it with the trikerion. For the next three days the chrism is cooked in the kettle, as the Gospel is read continually (the presbyters reading it by turns). On Great Tuesday the grape wine and fragrant substances are added to the kettle, followed on Great Wednesday by the grape wine and oil that were cooked during the fourth week of Great Lent. The preparation of chrism is concluded in the presence of the patriarch (or bishop) on Wednesday: the chrism is allowed to cool, the fragrant oils are added to the kettle, and everything is mixed thoroughly.¹²

The chrism is consecrated by the patriarch on Great Thursday at the divine liturgy. The vessels of chrism are brought ahead of time into the patriarchal cathedral from the church where the order of the preparation of chrism was performed, and to the singing of the troparion of Pentecost (“Blessed art thou, O Christ our God, who hast revealed fishermen most wise”) they are placed near the table of oblation. At the same time, an alabastron—a vessel containing the chrism consecrated in previous years—is brought to the cathedral from the patriarchal stavropegial church. At the great entrance the clergy carry the alabastron and vessels out of the altar through the north door, and in the royal doors the patriarch takes the alabastron and places it on the holy table. The other vessels are placed around the holy table.

Following the eucharistic canon the patriarch blesses each vessel of chrism three times, saying, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” The clergy in the altar sing, “Lord, have mercy.” The patriarch reads a prayer that expounds the significance of anointing with chrism as a joining to the rank of “the royal priesthood,” to a people chosen and holy. In the prayer Christians are called the “co-anointed” of Christ:

O Lord of mercy and Father of lights, the giver of every good and perfect gift, grant to us, unworthy though we be, the grace to fulfill the ministry of this great and life-giving mystery, as thou didst give it to Moses your faithful steward, and to Samuel thy servant, and to thy holy apostles, and send thy Holy Spirit upon this chrism: Make it a royal anointing, a spiritual anointing, a safeguard of life, a hallowing of souls and bodies, an oil of gladness, which was prefigured in the Law, and which shone forth in the New Covenant: For by it were anointed priests and high priests, prophets and kings, and thy holy apostles, and all who have been reborn through the washing of new birth, by them, and by the bishops and priests who have followed them, even to this day. And so, Lord God Almighty, by the coming of thy holy and adorable Spirit, make it a garment of immortality, a perfecting seal which imprints thy divine Name, and that of thine only-begotten Son, and that of thy Holy Spirit, on those who have received thy divine washing.

After the prayer the patriarch says, “Peace be unto all.” The singers reply, “And to thy spirit.” The deacon intones, “Bow your heads unto the Lord,” and another prayer for the consecration of chrism is read:

To thee, O God and King of all, do we bow the neck of our heart, giving thanks because thou hast judged us worthy to become the ministers of these thy divine mysteries: we proclaim the mercy, which thou hast poured out upon us with such abundance: and we pray that we may receive thy sanctification, like the chrism which is poured upon our heads, since the chrism which is

poured out is the Name of thine only-begotten Son, Christ our God, through whom the whole world, visible and invisible, is sweetly scented.

The last words contain an allusion to a verse from the Bible: “Thy name is as ointment poured forth” (Song 1.3). In the Eastern Christian tradition since the time of Origen this verse has been interpreted as pertaining to the name of Jesus Christ. Like chrism, poured out and exuding its fragrance, the name of Christ is poured out in the whole world, says Origen.¹³ Echoing Origen, John Chrysostom explains that the words of the Song of Solomon concerning the “ointment poured forth” pertain to the name of Jesus Christ, and he emphasizes its universal significance and miraculous power:

Wheresoever the Name of God is, all is auspicious. For if the names of Consuls make writings sure, much more doth the Name of Christ. . . . Marvelous is His name and great. . . . Invoke the Son, give thanks to the Father. For when the Son is invoked, the Father is invoked, and when He is thanked, the Son has been thanked. . . . Nothing is equal to this Name, marvelous is it everywhere. “Thy Name,” he saith, “is ointment poured forth” [Song 1.3]. He that hath uttered it is straightway filled with fragrance. . . . By this Name hath the world been converted, the tyranny dissolved, the devil trampled on, the heavens opened. We have been regenerated by this Name. If we have this, we beam forth. This maketh both martyrs and confessors.¹⁴

After reading the prayer the patriarch blesses each vessel of consecrated chrism three times, adding to it a little chrism from the alabastron, and replenishing the alabastron with the newly consecrated chrism. This ritual is of great symbolic significance, attesting that, like the apostolic succession of the hierarchy, there is a direct line of succession linking the holy chrism consecrated in our own time with the chrism consecrated in the ancient Church. Thus, along with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of the primate of the Church, in the sacrament of chrismation a Christian

also receives the apostolic blessing of many generations of Orthodox hierarchs—a blessing that may be traced back to the time of the apostles.

Notes

¹That is, as at the Eucharist, catechumens were not present for the consecration of chrism.

²In modern Orthodox liturgics the terms *myrrh* and *chrism* are synonymous, *chrism* being more commonly used today.—*Trans.*

³The myrrh, or chrism.

⁴Dionysius the Areopagite, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 4.2. In *The Celestial and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, John Parker, trans., 71.

⁵It is the singing of “Alleluia” that is understood to be “the sacred melody of the inspiration of the God-rapt prophets,” as evinced by the explanation that follows: “As for the sacred melody of the inspiration of the God-rapt Prophets [“Alleluia”], it is called by those who know Hebrew, ‘Praise of God,’ or ‘Praise ye the Lord” (Ibid., 4.3, 77).

⁶Ibid., 4.3, 76.

⁷Ibid.,

⁸That is, Christ.

⁹Dionysius the Areopagite, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 4.3. In *The Celestial and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, John Parker, trans., 76.

¹⁰It should be noted that not all primates of local Orthodox Churches have the authority to consecrate chrism. For example, the archbishop of Athos obtains chrism from the patriarch of Constantinople. Obtaining chrism from Constantinople was one of the conditions on which Constantinople recognized the autocephaly of the Church of Greece in the nineteenth century: this condition is mentioned in the *tomos* (decree) of autocephaly, dated June 29, 1850. According to the *tomos* of autocephaly of the Albanian Church, dated April 12, 1937, the archbishop of Albania must likewise obtain chrism from Constantinople.

¹¹Nefedov, *Tainstva i obryady Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*, 61.

¹²*Chin mirovareniya* [The Order for the Preparation of Chrism] (Moscow: 1894); Nefedov, *Tainstva i obryady Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*, 61–62.

¹³Origen, *Homilies on the Song of Solomon* 1.4 (PG 13:41D–42A).

¹⁴Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians* 9.2 (NPNF¹ 13:302–303).