

THE MYSTERY OF HOLY UNCTION

I. DEFINITION, NAMES, DIVINE INSTITUTION

The Holy Mystery of Unction is the Mystery in which, through the prayers with anointing with oil by the Presbyters of the Orthodox Church, the anointed one receives the Healing Grace of the Holy Spirit.¹ This Divine Mystery received various names either because of the use of the oil and prayers or from the way it is celebrated. Finally, the Divine institution of this Holy Mystery is found in Holy Scripture, especially in the Epistle of St James the Adelphotheos (*“Brother of Christ”*) who urged the sick to call upon the Elders of the Church to anoint them with oil, accompanied by prayer.

1. Definition and Names

The Holy Mystery of Unction, according to its external aspect, is the anointing by the Presbyter with Sanctified Oil accompanied with special prayer. Its internal aspect is the granting of Divine Grace for the healing of both body and soul. *“It is the mystical ceremony with oil and prayers celebrated by the Church for the ill. The ill, being anointed with this oil with faith and good hope in God, receive His aid.”*²

The illnesses of the soul, which are the fruits of sin, are forgiven in the Holy Mystery of Confession. However, under no circumstances can the Holy Mystery of Unction be considered as a necessary supplement of the Holy Mystery of Confession. Neither it is necessary for one’s Salvation, such as the Holy Mysteries of Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Communion and Confession. Our Salvation does not depend upon this Holy Mystery. Nevertheless, it is recommended for the healing of the illnesses of the body and soul. For, if the ill person has faith, he will recover from his illness whereas, on the other, he receives the forgiveness of his sins. It must be clearly understood that under no circumstances does this Divine and Sacred Mystery replace the other God-instituted Mystery of Confession. Through this Holy Mystery the sins, which one cannot remember, are forgiven, since the Holy Mystery of Confession is usually performed beforehand.

The various names given to the Holy Mystery of Unction were mainly due to the element of oil as well as the external ceremony. Through Sanctified Oil with prayer and anointing, it is called: *“Oil,” “Holy Oil,” “Unction,” “Sanctified Oil,” “Chrism” and “Anointing of Oil.”* The Latin terms are: *“Oleum,” “Unctio,” “Oleum Unctionis,” “Unctio Olei Sacraei,” “Extrema Unctio,” “Sacramentum Exeuntium,” “Sacramentum Moribandorum,” “Unctio Egreredientium,” “Unctio Emeritorum,” “Unctio Infirmorum.”* As a Mystery it is particularly for the ill and those who going through the process of departing this life.

¹ Cf. Plato of Moscow, *Orthodox Teaching*, pp. 159-160. Kefalas, *Catechesis*, p. 188. Frangopoulos, *Christian Faith*, pp. 218-219. Mitsopoulos, *Themata*, p. 326. Meyendorff, *Theology*, p. 199. Georgopoulos, *Anthology*, pp. 77-81.

² Kritopoulos, *ch. 13*, in Karmeris, *The dogmatics*, v. II, p. 543.

2. The Divine Institution

The Divine Institution of the Holy Mystery of Unction is testified to by St James the Adelphotheos who said: “*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone 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. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*”³ Through this instruction the divine James commanded the sick to invite the Presbyters of the Church, who are no less than the Priests who have been appointed by the Church for the ecclesiastic *Diakonia*.

The anointing with Oil does not have the nature of a healing medicine such as in the case of the anointing of a wound. It must be accompanied by prayer, which is exalted as a prayer of Faith that Saves the sick. The promise of the healing of the body through the anointing with blessed Oil is combined with the promise of forgiveness of sins that the ill person might have committed and which no physical medicine can forgive.

The anointing of Oil with prayer in the Holy Mystery of Unction differs from that mentioned in the Gospel of St Mark according to which the Holy Apostles “...*cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.*”⁴ There we clearly have a Supernatural Charisma of healing. The anointing with Oil is aimed towards the awakening of faith. This verse implies that the use of Oil by the Holy Apostles was familiar to the Lord Who did not disregard it. This was characterised as a preparation of the Divine Mystery of Holy Unction. However, this anointing of Oil has nothing common to that which St James instructed.

Only the words of St James support the Divine Institution of the Holy Mystery of Holy Unction.

3. The Testimony of Holy Tradition

The practice of the Orthodox Church and the Teachings of the Holy Fathers concerning the nature of the Holy Mystery of Unction are not so clear, nor do we have as many as for the other Holy Mysteries. Among the oldest testimonies is the *Egyptian Order*, which is identical to the *Apostolic Tradition* of St Hippolytus (2nd century) as well as the *Apostolic Orders* and the *Covenant of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Information concerning the Holy Mystery is also to be found in the *Eucholigion* (“*Prayer Book*”) of St Serapion.

³ James 5:13-16. Cf. Mitsopoulos, *Themata*, pp. 326-327. Georgopoulos, *Anthology*, p. 77.

⁴ Mark 6:13.

In the *Egyptian Order* we find a brief prayer for the Sanctification of the Oil, through which the officiator beseeches God to grant to everyone who partakes of it strength and health.

In the *Apostolic Orders* we find the following: “*Let the Bishop bless the water or the oil. If he is not present let the Presbyter bless with the presence of the Deacon.*” A brief prayer followed addressed to “*...the Lord, Sabaoth, the God of powers, the merciful and philanthropic Creator of the waters and giver of the oil.*” Through the prayer the officiator beseeches the Lord to Sanctify “*...this water and oil in the name of the one who presented them...*” (the sick) and grant him “*...through Christ strength of health, deportation of sicknesses, fleeing of demons, dismissal of all threats.*”⁵

According to the *Covenant of our Lord Jesus Christ* the Sanctified Oil is placed in a jar “*...before the altar...*” and the prayer is addressed to the Lord Christ Who is “*...the physician of all kinds of sicknesses and all kinds of diseases, Who gives freely to be healed.*” It is requested to send upon this oil “*...the Salvation of His Love to Save those who suffer and to heal the sick and to Sanctify those who return, when they approach with faith.*”⁶

It is worthy to note that the testimonies which refer to Unction as a Holy Mystery or inform us of this, belong to the ecclesiastic writers and Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church Egypt, from which the above orders of Sanctification originate.⁷ The first clear testimony, which characterised it as a Mystery, is found in the epistle of Pope Innocent I (+417) addressed to Decentium (*ad Decentium* 8, 12). Pope Innocent, referring to the words of St James concerning the anointing with oil, stressed that it must be understood as referring to the sick faithful who can be anointed with the Oil of Chrismation. This special Oil was prepared by the Bishop and used not only by the Priests but also by all the Christians. Finally, Pope Innocent I forbade the anointing of unrepentant sinners with this Sanctified Oil because it is a Mystery (“*...quia genus est sacramenti...*”) and since it is forbidden to offer the other Holy Mysteries (Holy Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist and Confession) to them, how can it be possible for them to receive this?⁸

The Orthodox Church urges the faithful that when ill we should never consult diviners, witchdoctors, mediums, psychics, magicians, astrologists, tarot card and coffee cup readers or sorcerers but instead to seek healing by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ and being anointed with the blessed Oil. As faithful disciples of Christ this is the only way to receive restoration of health as well as the forgiveness of our sins. Parents are strongly advised by the Church to anoint their children with the Sanctified Oil.

⁵ *Apostolic Orders*, VIII, 29, in *B*, v. 2, p. 163.

⁶ Fuller, *The anointing*, p. 113.

⁷ Bartmann, *Theologie Dogmatique*, v. II, p. 459. Origen, *In Leviticus*, Homily II, 4, in Migne, *P.G.*, 12, 418. St John Chrysostom, *About priesthood*, III, 6, in Migne, *P.G.*, 48, 644. *Ibid*, *To Matthew*, Homily 32, 6, in Migne, *P.G.*, 57, 384.

⁸ Innocent I, in Trepelas, *Dogmatique*, v. III, p. 353-354.

II. OFFICIATORS, EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ASPECT OF THE HOLY MYSTERY

1. The Officiators of the Holy Mystery

The officiators of the Holy Mystery of Unction are the Bishops and Presbyters of the Church who are vested with the Authority given by the Church. The Bishops authorise the Presbyters to celebrate the Mystery.⁹ The Presbyters, according to the words of St James, were not only the givers of the Divine Mystery but the officiators as well who Sanctified the oil through their prayers.

In the Orthodox Church the Holy Mystery of Unction is officiated by seven Presbyters and only in necessity by one. The presence of more than one Presbyter is according to the words of our Lord that “...if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, I Am there in the midst of them.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Holy Mystery should be officiated by seven Presbyters. Each one addresses one of the seven prayers. This practice was formed during the 10th century at the time of Arsenius, Patriarch of Constantinople (1255-1260).¹¹

The anointing could also be done by the faithful who received the Sanctified Oil. This testimony is witnessed to in the *Euchologion* of St Serapion and in the Epistle of Pope Innocent I to Decentium. It was in general use during the middle ages in the West.¹²

The Holy Mystery of Unction is mainly given to the sick but not necessarily only to those who are very ill. Anyone is able to call upon the Presbyters to pray for their restoration of health. This Holy Mystery cannot be given to those who are not Baptised or who have been excommunicated as heretics or schismatics, or even to those who have mortally sinned and have not repented.

2. The External or Visible Aspect of the Holy Mystery

The Sanctification of the Oil is combined inseparably with the offering of the Holy Mystery. It is officiated by the Presbyter. In the service of the Holy Unction we have a special prayer that is characterised by St Symeon of Thessalonica the New Theologian as a “*Prayer of Sanctification*.”¹³ This prayer is read upon the Oil by each Presbyter who partakes in the celebration of the Holy Mystery. Another prayer is repeated by each Presbyter during the anointing in a cross-shaped sign upon the forehead, the two cheeks, the chin and on both sides of each hand.

⁹ Innocent I, *Ad Decentium*, c. VIII, § 1, in Trempelas, *Dogmatique*, v. III, p. 355, note 22. Georgopoulos, *Anthology*, p. 78.

¹⁰ Matth. 18:19-20.

¹¹ Migne, *P.G.*, 140, 806.

¹² Ott, «*Precis*», p. 618. Bartmann, *Theologie Dogmatique*, v. II, p. 462.

¹³ St Symeon, *About the holy ceremony of the holy oil or unction*, ch. 288-290, in Migne, *P.G.*, 155, 525-529.

3. The Internal or Invisible Aspect of the Holy Mystery

The invisible Divine Grace, which is granted through the Holy Mystery of Unction, comprises its internal or invisible aspect. It initially relieves the sick from their bodily illness and leads them to complete recovery. Secondly, it grants them the forgiveness of sins. The objective of the Holy Mystery of Unction is primarily the healing of the illnesses of the body and not the forgiveness of sins. This is clearly understood when one bears in mind that the forgiveness of sins is the objective of the Holy Mystery of Confession. In addition to the above, St James determined at first that the anointing by oil with prayer is for the healing of bodily sicknesses and secondly for the forgiveness of sins.

It is true that the ill person is not always cured of his affliction although it is certain that Divine Grace is granted through the Holy Mystery, strengthening him with patience, hope and peace. We are not always restored to good health due to the fact that the Divine Grace aims at restoring our spiritual health and leads us to Salvation. Restoration of health is granted to the ill when it will cause them to progress in virtue and for their Salvation.

The Holy Mystery of Unction is necessary to secure the restoration of our health. It must be clearly stated that this Holy Mystery does not become the medicine for Immortality and Eternal Life in this life of vanity. Otherwise this would be contradictory to the plan of our Salvation and Regeneration through Christ Jesus. St Paul emphasised that we should put aside our mortal bodies in order to achieve the Regeneration of the new man in Christ. He proclaimed that “...we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from Heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life.”¹⁴ Again “...because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.”¹⁵ One must never forget the example of St Paul who in his illness requested three times to be healed by Christ but the Lord answered him: “My Grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”¹⁶

¹⁴ 2 Corinth. 5:1-4.

¹⁵ Rom. 8:21-23.

¹⁶ 2 Corinth. 12:9.

We must always bear in mind that the forgiveness of sins, under no circumstances, can be replaced by this Divine and Holy Mystery of Unction, nor can it replace the Mystery of Holy Confession. It can grant forgiveness of sins to those who truly have previously and sincerely confessed their sins in the Holy Mystery of Confession but in their weakness of mind, could not remember in detail all their sins. Consequently, the Holy Mystery of Unction is additional to that of Holy Confession.