

DIOCESE OF CROOKSTON HOLY OILS AND THE CHRISM MASS

The Use of Oil in the Ancient Near East

Throughout the Bible, various references indicate the importance of olive oil in daily life. Oil was used in cooking, particularly in the making of bread, that basic food substance for nourishment (e.g. Numbers 11:7-9); as a fuel for lamps (e.g. Matthew 25:1-9); and as a healing agent in medicine (e.g. Isaiah 1:6 and Luke 10:34). Moreover, with oil the Jews anointed the head of a guest as a sign of welcome (e.g. Luke 7:46), beautified one's appearance (e.g. Ruth 3:3), and prepared a body for burial (e.g. Mark 16:1). In religious practices, the Jews also used oil to dedicate a memorial stone in honor of God (e.g. Genesis 28:18); to consecrate the meeting tent, the ark of the covenant, the table, the lampstand, the laver, the altar of incense and the altar of holocausts (e.g. Exodus 31:26-29); and to offer sacrifices (e.g. Exodus 29:40). The use of oil was clearly a part of the daily life of the people.

The Use of Oils in the Scriptures

Sacred Scripture also attests to the spiritual symbolism of oil. For instance, Psalm 23:5 reads, "You anoint my head with oil," signifying favor and strength from the Lord; and Psalm 45:8 reads, "You love justice and hate wickedness; therefore, God your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellow kings," signifying the special designation from God and the joy of being his servant. Moreover, to be "the anointed" of the Lord indicated receiving a special vocation from the Lord and the empowerment with the Holy Spirit to fulfill that vocation: Jesus, echoing the words of Isaiah, spoke, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, He has anointed me" (Luke 4:18). St. Paul emphasized this point, "God is the one who firmly establishes us along with you in Christ; it is He who anointed us and has sealed us, thereby depositing the first payment, the Spirit in our hearts" (2 Corinthians 1:21). Therefore, the symbolism of oil is rich — sanctification, healing, strengthening, beautification, dedication, consecration and sacrifice.

The Sacramental Use of Oils in the Church

The Church, based on the Scriptural witness used oils in the celebrations of anointing. The Letter of Saint James witnesses to the early connection of anointing the sick for healing and the forgiveness of sins: "Is one of you sick? Let him send for the presbyters of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Lord's name. Prayer offered in faith will restore the sick man, and the Lord will give him relief; if he is guilty of sins, they will be pardoned." (James 5:14-15)

Saint Cyprian of Carthage (+258), a North African bishop, is a witness to Christian initiation in his day that already contained the core actions of Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharist. "It is also necessary that he should be anointed who is baptized; so that, having received the chrism, that is, the anointing, he may be anointed of God, and have in him the grace of Christ. Further, it is the Eucharist whence the baptized are anointed with the oil sanctified on the altar." (Letter 69, 2) We see that already the ritual of 'sanctifying' the oil is accomplished within the celebration of the Eucharist by the bishop prior to initiation.

A writer of the early 5th century, Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite, wrote a reflection, "On the Holy Myron" (Chrism) describing and giving spiritual interpretation for the making of the Chrism. "The bishop pours the Balsam oil over the olive oil, indicating thus, that the divinity, which is exalted from all things, poured out its essence upon the humanity. The Word empties out Himself into womb of the Virgin without being poured out, yet remaining completely in the bosom of His Father. That is why; He is called 'the Myron emptied out' (Songs 1:3). The fact that He was poured out teaches us this: his blood was poured out and He descended into the womb of the Virgin, without His having departed from His Father." (Chap 17)

The twelfth Council of Toledo (Spain) in 681 prescribed that each church have an ambry for safeguarding the holy oils, just as the tabernacle was for reserving remaining hosts after Mass. In 1281, the Council of Lambeth (England) reenacted a decree of Pope Innocent III on the custody of the holy oils (Twentieth Constitution, Fourth Lateran Council, 1215) that they had to be kept under lock and key.

The Celebration of the Chrism Mass

The ceremony of the Mass of the Chrism has its roots in the Roman-Germanic Pontifical of 950 AD, and this form was used with (minor adjustments) until the general reform of the Holy Week Rites by Pope Pius XII in 1955. As it stands now, the Chrism Mass, which was always celebrated on the morning of Holy Thursday, may be celebrated on an earlier day so as to enable the people and priests more easily to gather with the Bishop. (Ceremonial of Bishops, 275)

The Chrism Mass, which the bishop concelebrates with his college of presbyters, is the Mass at which the bishop consecrates the holy chrism and blesses the other oils. "The holy chrism consecrated by the bishop is used to anoint the newly baptized, to seal the candidates for confirmation, and to anoint the hands of presbyters (priests) and the heads of bishops at their ordination, as well as in the rites of anointing pertaining to the dedication of churches and altars. The oil of the catechumens is used in the preparation of the

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catechumens for their baptism. The oil of the sick is used to bring comfort and support to the sick in their infirmity.” (Ceremonial of Bishops, 274).

This Mass manifests the unity of the priests with their bishop. Here the bishop blesses three oils — the Oil of Catechumens ("Oleum Catechumenorum" or "Oleum Sanctorum"), the Oil of the Infirm ("Oleum Infirmorum"), and Holy Chrism ("Sacrum Chrisma") — which will be used in the administration of the sacraments throughout the diocese for the year.

Care and Use of the Holy Oils in Parishes

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. The use of the proper oils involves the validity of the sacrament celebrated, therefore it is important that the proper oils be used. "In the administration of sacraments in which the sacred oils are to be used, the minister must use oils pressed from olives or from other plants that have been recently consecrated or blessed by the bishop." (Canon 847)
2. "Each year when the bishop blesses the oils and consecrates the chrism, the pastor should see that the oil oils are properly disposed of by burning and that they are replaced by the newly blessed oils." (*Book of Blessings*, 1127)
3. "The pastor is to obtain the sacred oils from his own bishop and keep them carefully in a fitting place." (Canon 847) Priests have a responsibility to see to the reverent use and safe custody of the holy oils. (*Sacramentary*, Appendix II, "Rite of the Blessing of Oils and Consecrating the Chrism", 28)
4. "The oils used for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, holy orders and anointing of the sick according to ancient tradition are reverently reserved in a special place in the church. This repository should be secured and protected by a lock." (*Book of Blessings*, 1125) It is a laudable practice to display oils in larger more dignified containers. (See *Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter*, 1994, Volume XXX, August/September 1994)
5. The plastic bottles containing the oils given to the parishes after the Chrism Mass, are not for display purposes or liturgical use. The plastic containers are used to transport the oils or for non-public storage. If the oils are to be displayed they should be displayed in dignified vessels. When being used in the liturgy the oils should be in proper vessels, not in the plastic containers. "Vessels and implements used in the liturgical celebration should be of such quality and design that they speak of the importance of the ritual action.....vessels for holy oils...are presented to the assembly in one way or another and speak well or ill of the deed in which the assembly is engaged." (*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, 97) "The vessels used to hold the holy oils, should be worthy of their function and be closed in such a way as to prevent the oils from being spilled and to insure that they remain fresh." (*Book of Blessings*, 1126)
6. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has stated that unblessed oil may be added to blessed oil only in the case of *necessity*. This would exclude diluting the oils merely in order to increase the volume of oils for display. (See *Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter*, 1994, VolumeXXX,August/September1994) In order to provide parishes and institutions of the Diocese with sufficient oil for use in the liturgy and for display purposes, a larger amount of the holy oils will be provided to those parishes and institutions which make a request.
7. The oils blessed at the Chrism Mass may be received in a ritual way in the parish during the Mass of the Lord's Supper on HolyThursday. The oils are presented during the presentation of the gifts. The oils should be brought forward "in suitable vessels," again, not in the plastic containers.
8. The oils used during the celebration of baptism, confirmation and anointing of the sick should not be wiped off the person anointed.
9. The oils are NOT to be employed for non-sacramental use. The holy oils which must be renewed each year are for sacramental use only. They are sacred and should be treated with dignity and respect and not be subjected to non-sacramental uses.

Sacred Chrism

"The consecration of the chrism belongs to the bishop alone." (*Sacramentary*, Appendix II, "Rite of the Blessing of Oils and Consecrating the Chrism," also see Canon 880)

Oil of the Sick

In case of true necessity the priest may bless additional oils for the anointing of the sick. "Beside a bishop those can bless the oil to be used in the anointing of the sick: ...in case of necessity, any priest but only in the celebration of the sacrament." (Canon 999) This means the priest may bless oil for the anointing of the sick for a particular use, *not to provide additional oil for display purposes*.

"There is no norm here, but it seems quite clear that the oils, even in their smallest vessels, are not to be kept permanently in a priest's jacket, vehicle, in the rectory, or in a safe or cabinet of the less-frequented sacristy. ...Reverence for the oils and for the church they serve necessitate the reservation of all of the parish oils in one common repository or three individual repositories, one for each oil. Thus the oil from the smaller vessels not used on a given visit to the sick is to be poured back into the larger vessel, or the several smaller vessels that are carried to the sick are to be reserved in the same repository." (*Sacristy Manual*, published by Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago, p. 68, also see *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, 22)

Oil of Catechumens

The oil of catechumens is blessed by the bishop. "In the case of the baptism of adults, however, priests have the faculty to bless the oil of catechumens before the anointing in the designated stage of the Catechumenate." (*Sacramentary*, Appendix II, "Rite of the Blessing of Oils and Consecrating the Chrism". Also see *RCIA*, 101). This means the priest may bless the oil of catechumens for a particular use only and *not to provide oil for display purposes*.

Conclusion

Renewal of the liturgy requires the opening up of our symbols, especially the fundamental ones: of bread and wine, water, the laying on of hands and anointing with oil. "Just as Christ invited those who heard him to share his personal union with the Father through material signs, so Christ leads the Church through these same signs in the liturgy from the visible to the invisible. As a result, *effective liturgical signs, have a teaching function and encourage full, conscious, and active participation, express and strengthen faith, and lead people to God. Poorly utilized or minimal signs do not enliven the community's faith and can even diminish active participation. It must likewise be kept in mind that the liturgy and its signs and symbols do not exercise merely a teaching function. They also touch and move a person to conversion of heart and not simply to enlightenment of mind.*" (*Built of Living Stones*, 26) The use of the oils in the sacramental rites is encouraged in a generous manner. These actions can engage and unify the entire assembly and lead the People of God to an authentic appreciation of symbol.