

## **The Sacrament of Holy Unction: Holy Wednesday afternoon and Evening**

### Introduction

On the afternoon or evening of Great and Holy Wednesday, the Sacrament or Mystery of Holy Unction is conducted in Orthodox parishes. The Sacrament of Holy Unction is offered for the healing of soul and body and for forgiveness of sins. At the conclusion of the service of the Sacrament, the body is anointed with oil, and the grace of God, which heals infirmities of soul and body, is called down upon each person. The Sacrament is performed by a gathering of priests, ideally seven in number, however, it can be performed by a lesser number and even by a single priest.

### **Holy Unction**

When one is ill and in pain, this can very often be a time of life when one feels alone and isolated. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, or Holy Unction as it is also known, reminds us that when we are in pain, either physical, emotional, or spiritual, Christ is present with us through the ministry of His Church. He is among us to offer strength to meet the challenges of life, and even the approach of death.

As with Chrismation, oil is also used in this Sacrament as a sign of God's presence, strength, and forgiveness. After the reading of seven Epistle lessons, seven Gospel lessons and the offering of seven prayers, which are all devoted to healing, the priest anoints the body with the Holy Oil. Orthodoxy does not view this Sacrament as available only to those who are near death. It is offered to all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit.



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Christ came to the world to "bear our infirmities." One of the signs of His divine Messiahship was to heal the sick. The power of healing remains in the Church since Christ himself remains in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

The Sacrament of the Unction of the sick is the Church's specific prayer for healing. If the faith of the believers is strong enough, and if it is the will of God, there is every reason to believe that the Lord can heal those who are diseased.

The biblical basis for the Sacrament is found in James 5:14-16:

Is any among you sick, let him call for the presbyters 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 man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

In ancient Christian literature one may find indirect testimonies of the Mystery of Unction in Saint Irenaeus of Lyons and in Origen. Later there are clear testimonies of it in Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, who have left prayers for the healing of the infirm which entered later into the rite of Unction; and likewise in Saint Cyril of Alexandria. In the fifth century, Pope Innocent I answered a series of questions concerning the Mystery of Unction, indicating in his answers that a) it should be performed "upon believers who are sick"; b) it may be performed also by a bishop, since one should not see in the words of the Apostle, let him call for the presbyters, any prohibition for a bishop to participate in the sacred action; c) this anointment may not be performed "on those undergoing ecclesiastical penance," because it is a "Mystery," and to those who are forbidden the other Mysteries, how can one allow only one?

The express purpose of the Sacrament of Holy Unction is healing and forgiveness. Since it is not always the will of God that there should be physical healing, the prayer of Christ that God's will be done always remains as the proper context of the Sacrament. In addition, it is the clear intention of the Sacrament that through the anointing of the sick body the sufferings of the person should be sanctified and united to the sufferings of Christ. In this way, the wounds of the flesh are consecrated, and strength is given that the suffering of the diseased person may not be unto the death of his soul, but for eternal salvation in the resurrection and life of the Kingdom of God.

It is indeed the case that death inevitably comes. All must die, even those who in this life are given a reprieve through healing in order to have more time on the earth. Thus, the healing of the sick is not itself a final goal, but is merely "instrumental" in that it is given by God as a sign of his mercy and as a grace for the further opportunity of man to live for him and for others in the life of this world.

In the case where a person is obviously in the final moments of his earthly life, the Church has special prayers for the "separation of soul and body."

Thus, it is clear that the Sacrament of Holy Unction is for the sick-both the physically and mentally sick-and is not reserved for the moment of death. The Sacrament of Unction is not the "last rites" as is sometimes thought; the ritual of the anointing itself in no way indicates that it should be administered merely in "extreme" cases. Holy Unction is the Sacrament of the spiritual, physical, and mental healing of a sick person whatever the nature or the gravity of the illness may be.

### **Orthodox Christian Celebration of the Sacrament of Holy unction**

The Sacrament itself calls for seven priests, seven readings from the Epistles and Gospels, seven prayers and seven anointings with oil specifically blessed during the service. Although it is not always possible to perform the sacrament in this way, the normal procedure is still to gather together as many priests and people as possible.



The faithful come forward to be anointed with the Holy Unction "*...for the healing of soul and body...*" Photo courtesy of John Thomas and used with permission.

At the end of the service the priest anoints the faithful as he makes the sign of the cross on the forehead and top and palms of the hands saying, "For the healing of soul and body."

### **Order of the Service**

#### **1. Introductory Prayers and Psalms 143 & 51**

In these Psalms we confess our sinfulness before God and ask Him to cleanse us and make a "new and right spirit within us" (Psalm 51:10).

#### **2. Canon**

In this series of verses that are read or sung, we ask God to show mercy upon us and cleanse our souls, to drive away all evil powers, to grant salvation to those who are sick or suffering, and to grant us the healing of our souls and bodies. At the end of several sets of verses, we ask God to renew our lives so that we may bless, thank and glorify Him forever.

### **3. Short Prayers or Troparia to the Saints**

We pray to the saints - especially those who have helped the sick and suffering, and to those who have been martyred for the glory of God - and to the Mother of God to intercede for us for the salvation of our souls.

### **4. Epistle and Gospel Lessons and Prayers**

There are seven sets of Epistle and Gospel readings and prayers.

James 5:10-16; Luke: 10:25-37

Romans 15:1-7; Luke 19:1-10

I Corinthians 12:27-31;13:1-8; Matthew 10:1,5-8

II Corinthians 6:16-18, 7:1; Matthew 8:14-23

II Corinthians 1:8-11; Matthew 25:1-13

Galatians 5:22-6:2; Matthew 15:21-28

I Thessalonians 5:14-23; Matthew 9:9-13

Each of the seven prayers asks for the remission of the our sins, for the healing of our souls and bodies and for life everlasting.

### **Hymns And Prayers of the Sacrament**

#### **Exapostelation of the Sacrament**

In mercy, O Good One, cast Thine eyes upon the petitions of us who today are come together in Thy Holy Temple, to anoint Thy sick servants with Thine oil divine.



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### Troparion (Tone Fourth)

Thou who alone art a speedy succor, O Christ, manifest Thy speedy visitation from on high upon Thy sick servants; deliver them from their infirmities, and cruel pain; and raise them up again to sing praises unto Thee, and without ceasing, to glorify Thee; through the prayers of the Birth-Giver of God, O Thou who alone lovest mankind.

### Prayer of the Oil

O Lord who, in thy mercies and bounties, healest the disorders of our souls and bodies, do Thou, the same Master, sanctify this Oil, that it may be effectual for those who shall

be anointed therewith, unto healing, and unto relief from every passion, every malady of the flesh and of the spirit, and every ill; and that therein may be glorified Thy most Holy Name, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.

### Prayer of Anointing

O Holy Father, Physician of souls and bodies, Who didst send Thine only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to heal every infirmity and deliver from death: Heal Thou, also, Thy servants from the ills of the body and soul which do hinder them, and quicken them, by the Grace of Thy Christ; through the prayers of our most Holy Lady, the Birth-Giver of God and Ever Virgin Mary; through the intercession of the honorable bodiless Powers of Heaven; through the power of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross; through the protection of the honorable, glorious, Prophet and Forerunner John the Baptist; of the holy, glorious and righteous Martyrs; of our righteous and Godbearing Fathers; of the holy and healing unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian, Cyrus and John, Thaleleus and Tryfon, Panteleimon and Hermolaus, Samson and Diomidis, Mokius and Aniketos; of the holy and righteous ancestors of God, Joachim and Anna; and of all the Saints. For Thou art the Fountain of healing, O God, our God, and unto Thee do we ascribe glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.