

CHAPTER 8

On Holy Unction

Inq.: Father, it remains for you to tell me about the Mystery of Holy Unction. What basis does this Mystery have in the New Testament?

EC: The Apostle James gives us the following exhortation: "Is any sick among you? 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 shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he has committed sins, they shall be forgiven him" (James 5:14-15).

We understand, therefore, that Holy Unction is a Mystery whereby the sick Christian is anointed with holy oil, and receives the grace of healing of both body and soul through the prayers of the priests.

This Mystery shows once again how real our holy faith is and how well-grounded are the Mysteries administered by our priests. According to our Lord's teaching, our Church administered this Mystery especially on those who were ill and could not be cured by doctors. Doctors are also good and necessary, because they were also appointed by the Lord (Sir. 38:12) for the healing of human illnesses; however, for many illnesses no suitable medicines were found.¹⁸ But,

“with men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). In the same way, our Lord, preaching the Gospel, healed whoever was ill (Matt. 4:23-25). He healed those, however, who had faith in Him.

Jesus Christ gave to His Apostles the authority to cast out evil spirits and to heal all kinds of illnesses by the power of the Holy Spirit and faith, saying these words: “And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:7-8). The Apostles healed the sick, according to the command of the Lord, and the basis for the Mystery of Unction is found in the aforementioned words of the Apostle James (5:14-15). So, because in the Apostle’s epistle it says, “call for the elders of the church,” our Church instituted the rite of Holy Unction for the ill, to be administered by three to seven priests. But if this is not possible, there should be at least two priests, and only in cases of extreme emergency does our Church permit the celebration of the Mystery by only one priest.

Inq.: But nowhere in the Holy Scriptures does it say that this Mystery is established by the Saviour.

EC: Didn’t I show you in the above that the Mystery was performed by the Holy Apostles, according to the command of the Lord Jesus Christ? (Mark 6:12-13). Didn’t you hear how clearly the Apostle James speaks of this and teaches

18. “Sir.” is the abbreviation for the Old Testament book Wisdom of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus.

how we should also perform it? The Apostles aren't called the founders of the Mysteries, but rather the "stewards" (1 Cor. 4:1). Therefore, the Mystery was not instituted by the Apostles, but by Christ.

Inq.: Despite all this, some claim that Holy Unction was never a Mystery, but rather a simple, symbolic anointing or even a mere laying on of hands by the Apostles. The healing could have taken place even without the anointing of oil, since in this case the primary, essential element is prayer. It was not necessary for the oil to be used, since healing occurred without the use of oil as well (Mark 16:18 and Acts 14:10).

EC: Holy Unction is a Mystery, instituted by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ through the Apostles, and not merely a symbolic act. The fact that the Saviour and the Apostles also healed without the use of oil does not mean that Holy Unction is not a Mystery or that the oil can be omitted from the service. We shall believe in the teaching of the Holy Apostles, which clearly and brilliantly shows us that we should anoint the sick with sanctified oil (Mark 6:12-13).

Inq.: If Holy Unction is a Mystery, through which the grace of the Holy Spirit is imparted to the sick, why doesn't it heal everyone?

EC: Don't you know that even Christ Himself was not able to perform miracles "on His behalf" for His fellow-countrymen because of their lack of faith? (Mark 6:5-6¹⁹).

19. "And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands

When He healed the sick, He confessed in front of all the faith of those who were worthy to receive such divine blessings (Matt. 9:22-29).

Apart from this, the prayers of the priests during Holy Unction also ask for the remission of sins. If a sick person dies after the service of Holy Unction, we believe that God has forgiven his sins, which had rendered his soul sick....

Inq.: But why, in Roman Catholicism, is the Mystery of Holy Unction administered by the bishops, and only to those who are dying? Why do they call it "extreme unction" or the "last rites"?

EC: In Holy Scripture, and precisely where it speaks of the practice of this Mystery (James 5:14-15), it does not tell us to call for the bishops, but for the presbyters. It is true that in those days, the word "presbyter" could also denote "bishop," as, elsewhere in the Bible, the word "bishop" is used to mean "presbyter." Similarly, it is also true that the Mystery of Holy Unction was practiced by the Holy Apostles (Mark 6:12-13). But nowhere is it stated that it was administered only by the bishops or that it had to be administered only to those who were dying; but the Scripture says "if any among you be sick," and clearly says after that, "the Lord will raise him." Therefore, if this Mystery is an anointing for the passage of man from this life, then it should say that God takes the dying man with Him, rather than that "the Lord will raise him," that is, make him whole again. Where do you think the truth lies?

upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief. And he went round about the villages, teaching."

As for the remission of sins just before death, the Orthodox believe that it is necessary for the dying person to receive Holy Communion, and not just anointing with holy oil, as the Roman Catholics do.

Inq.: Where is Holy Unction administered?

EC: In church, or at the home of the person to whom the Mystery is to be administered.

Inq.: On which days can Holy Unction be given?

EC: There are no set days and periods for its performance. Holy Unction can be given whenever necessary. During the week of the Lord's Divine Passion, it is [to be] celebrated on Holy Wednesday, on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, but has long been a fixed custom for it to take place [only] on Holy Wednesday, before the Hours, in remembrance of the Lord's anointing with myrrh by the sinful woman (Luke 7:37). At this time the Mystery takes place in Church, performed for all the faithful and with the participation of many priests. As is the norm, the person who is to receive the Mystery must first have confession, and with the reception of the Mystery he will receive spiritual cleanliness, that is, forgiveness of sins, and the healing of his bodily ailments.

Inq.: Is it permissible for Holy Unction to be administered to the healthy?

EC: Because Holy Unction is offered not only for the healing of bodily illnesses but also for the forgiveness of sins [i.e. the healing of the soul], it can be celebrated not only for those who are ill, but also for the healthy, and not only once, but many times.