

The Use of Sacramental Oils



During Holy Week (commonly on Holy Thursday), the bishop of every diocese, joined by their priests, gather at the Cathedral to celebrate the Chrism Mass. This Mass manifests the unity of the priests with their bishop. During this Mass, the bishop blesses two oils (the Oil of Catechumens ("*Oleum Catechumenorum*" or "*Oleum Sanctorum*") and the Oil of the Infirm ("*Oleum Infirmorum*"). He then consecrates the remaining oil (Holy Chrism ("*Sacrum Chrisma*"). These oils will be used in the diocese's parish churches to confer the sacraments during the next year and are usually stored in a wall-mounted, locked container called an Ambry.

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 (Nm 11:7-9); as a fuel for lamps (Mt 25:1-9); and as a healing agent in medicine (Is 1:6 and Lk 10:34). Moreover, with oil the Jews anointed the head of a guest as a sign of welcome (Lk 7:46) and prepared a body for burial (Mk 16:1). In religious practices, the Jews also used oil to dedicate a memorial stone in honor of God (Gn 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 (Ex 31:26-29); and to offer sacrifices (Ex 29:40). The use of oil was clearly a part of the daily life of the people.

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;" signifying the special designation from God and the joy of being his servant. Moreover, Jesus, echoing the words of Isaiah, spoke, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, He has anointed me" (Lk 4:18). Therefore, the symbolism of oil is rich sanctification, healing, strengthening, beautification, dedication, consecration and sacrifice.

Given this heritage, the early Christian Church adopted the use of olive oil for its sacramental rituals. *The Oil of Catechumens* is used in connection with the Sacrament of Baptism. Anointing with the Oil of Catechumens following a prayer of exorcism may also take place during the period of the RCIA Catechumenate on one or several occasions. In all cases, this anointing symbolizes the person's need for the help and strength of God to sever the bondage of the past and to overcome the opposition of the devil, so that they may profess their faith, come to baptism, and live as a child of God.

The ***Oil of the Infirm*** is used in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (also known as Extreme Unction). St. James wrote, "Is there anyone sick among you? He should ask for the priests of the church. They in turn are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord. This prayer uttered in faith will reclaim the one who is ill, and the Lord will restore him to health. If he has committed any sins, forgiveness will be his" (Jas 5:14-15). The *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus recorded one of the earliest formulas for blessing the Oil of the Infirm. Presently, the priest, anointing the forehead of the person, says, "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit," and then anointing their hands, says, "May the Lord who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up." Another body part may also be anointed, if the hands are not accessible or if there is another particular need.

Finally, ***Holy Chrism*** is a mixture of olive oil and balsam, a liquid aromatic resin. This oil is linked with the sanctification of individuals. In Old Testament times, the priest, prophets and kings of the Jewish people were anointed. This oil is used in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and priestly Holy Orders, since they impart an indelible sacramental character upon the recipient(s). The consecration (not blessing) of the Holy Chrism is different from that of the other oils. Here the bishop breathes over the vessel of chrism, a gesture which symbolizes both the Holy Spirit coming down to consecrate this oil, and the life-giving, sanctifying nature of the character of the sacraments for which it is used. (Recall how our Lord "breathed" on the Apostles in the Upper Room, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (Jn 20:22).) The concelebrants at the Chrism Mass also extend their right hands toward the chrism as the bishop says the consecratory prayer, signifying that in union with their bishop they share "in the authority by which Christ Himself builds up and sanctifies and rules His Body," the Church (Vatican II, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, No. 2).

Of note: Regarding baptism, St. Hippolytus in the *Apostolic Tradition* spoke of an anointing after the actual baptism with the "oil of thanksgiving." Similarly today, right after the actual baptism in the present rite, the priest anoints the person on the crown of the head with sacred chrism oil, saying, "God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of His body, sharing everlasting life. Amen."

Additionally, in the sacrament of confirmation, the bishop anoints the forehead of the candidate with Sacred Chrism saying, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Sacred Chrism is also used during the ritual ordination of a priest; the bishop anoints with chrism the palms each newly ordained priest. In the ordination rite of a bishop, the consecrating bishop anoints the head of the new bishop.

Finally, Holy Chrism is used in the dedication ceremony of a parish church. During the dedication ritual and Mass, the bishop anoints the altar, pouring Holy Chrism on the middle of the altar and on each of its four corners. After anointing the altar, he then anoints the walls of the Church in 12 or 4 places marked by crosses.