

What Is Holy Unction?

Holy unction is the Church's holy mystery of physical and spiritual healing for Orthodox Christians.

Healing was part of Jesus Christ's ministry as the Messiah, by which he proved that he was God as well as man. Reporting numerous cases of cures at his hands, the Bible says he went about "healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Matthew 4:23). The Church continues this ministry of his, because as the Bible tells us, it is "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18) — the way in which he is present and active in the world now, still working to save and sanctify those who would have him. It does so in holy unction: sacramental anointing with blessed oil and prayer.

The Bible tells us Jesus Christ and his apostles practiced holy unction: at his bidding, they "anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (Mark 6:13). The Church continues to do the same for us now, in line with these biblical instructions from Saint James the Brother of the Lord, first bishop of Jerusalem: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the presbyters of the Church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. And if he has sinned, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15).

As these words make plain, healing and forgiveness are the object of holy unction. Healing and forgiveness are the antidotes to sickness and sin, which are related to each other, because illness, pain and death entered creation when the parents of the human race, Adam and Eve, first sinned against God (Genesis 3:1-24). This "ancestral sin" of theirs broke their organic link with the only source of their being and life: God. Without this vital connection, they, their descendants and the world over which they were set lost their life force, becoming subject to dissolution, decline, death and decomposition. This rupture is overcome in Jesus Christ who, being both fully divine and fully human, reintegrates God and man in himself, restoring the lifegiving link between the Creator and creation broken by humankind's fall into sin.

The service of holy unction is made up of psalms, prayers, hymns and Bible readings that focus on the theme of physical and spiritual healing, during which olive oil is blessed to anoint the sick. Olive oil lends itself to being a natural sign of healing and forgiveness, which are acts of God's mercy, because in New Testament Greek there is a play on the words for "olive oil" (*elaion*) and "mercy" (*eleos*), which sound alike. A little wine is mixed in the oil, recalling the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, who poured "wine and oil" on the injuries of the wounded and half-dead stranger, before bandaging them and making arrangements for his recovery (Luke 10:4). During the service, the presbyter anoints the sick and lays the open Gospel Book, which contains the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, on their heads, as a sign of him touching them with his healing hand through his body, the Church.

* Conversely, there is a link between holiness and healthiness: in fact, the English words "holy," "healthy" and "whole" all come from the same root.

If one's faith is strong enough, and if it is God's will, there is every reason to believe the Lord can heal the sick through holy unction. In God's inscrutable wisdom, it may not be his will that healing always take place — sometimes bearing the cross of sickness is the only thing that makes us realize our true frailty without him and humbles us into repentance and spiritual growth. (Consider Saint Paul the Apostle's experience in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: sickness can be a sort of physical "thorn in the flesh" God uses to save us from becoming spiritually conceited and sinfully proud. In such cases, holy unction provides the benefit of blessing our illnesses with God's grace and giving us strength to bear such crosses by his power, so the suffering of our mortal bodies works for the good of our immortal souls. "All things work together for the good of those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

Moreover, in performing holy unction, the Church does not look down on moral and reasonable use of medicine, medical treatment and medical science, products of the human intelligence that God planted in us, as do some sects or cults nowadays. Many saints of the Church, like Cosmas and Damian of Mesopotamia or Anastasia the Great Martyr, were doctors and pharmacists who combined their knowledge, training and skills with faith and prayer to work cures both medical and miraculous in their practices. But the Church has never lost sight of something important: humans are "psychosomatic" beings — made up of soul (*psykhē* in Greek) and body (*soma* in Greek) — so what affects us spiritually does so physically, and vice versa. In light of this fact, holy unction is important for our healthiness and wholeness.

Finally, Orthodox Christians differ from others when it comes to holy unction. Roman Catholics practice something like it, but have tended to think of it as a one-time preparation for death: "extreme unction" or "last rites." Many Protestants do not practice anything like it, mistakenly dismissing it as something unbiblical (despite the evidence laid out here) and lacking the biblical, orthodox sense of the Church explained above. But for Orthodox Christians, holy unction is a biblical and sacramental mystery inherited from Jesus Christ and his apostles, practiced by the Church since his lifetime on earth, with its original ancient focus on healing and forgiveness for the living — and thus repeated as often as necessary.

Understanding holy unction aright as Orthodox Christians, let us then reverently avail ourselves of this healing treasure of Jesus Christ's one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church for the good of our souls and bodies, so we too may cry out in thanksgiving and praise with Saint David the Psalmist: "Lord my God, I cried out to you, and you have healed me" (Psalm 29:2 by the Septuagint Greek numbering; 30:2 by the Hebrew Masoretic).

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