

The Holy Oils

Kristopher W. Seaman

Many of us well know the story of the Lord's calling and anointing David as king. Having been told that one of Jesse's sons was to be the king, Samuel went to Bethlehem. When the eighth of Jesse's sons was presented to Samuel, the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him." In the Old Testament, those whom God called to be kings, priests, and prophets were anointed with an oil that was to be regarded as "holy to the Lord" (Exodus 30:37).

For Christians, anointing is significant because it is closely tied to who Christ is. *Christos* is the Greek word for the Hebrew *messiah*. Both words mean "anointed one." Jesus as the Christ is anointed by God, that is, he is the perfect embodiment of God's purpose and mission. He is the perfect Priest, Prophet, and King. In Baptism, Christians share in Christ's perfect identity as God's Son. We hear in the Rite of Baptism for Children, "He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain forever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King."

During Holy Week or shortly before, the bishop of a diocese gathers with his priests and some of the laity to bless the oils for the sick and catechumens and to consecrate the chrism. This is indeed a rich liturgy.

The first oil to be blessed is the oil for the sick. The prayer of blessing recalls Christ's ministry of healing the sick. The Holy Spirit is invoked upon the oil so that all those anointed will be healed in body, mind, and soul. The oil is principally used for the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

Next, the oil for catechumens is blessed. Catechumens are those who are preparing to become Christians. This oil will be used, then, for catechumens as they journey toward Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. It is also used in the Baptism of infants. The prayer asks that those who are anointed will be strengthened in faith, grow in their understanding of the Gospel, and live more fully Christian discipleship.

The final oil, chrism, is a mixture of olive oil and balsam, a fragrance from the Holy Land. Chrism receives its name from Christ, as do we who are Christians, because we have been anointed with this oil. The prayer is quite rich as it recalls the song of David and the anointing of Aaron as priest;



OIL OF
THE SICK



OIL OF THE
CATECHUMENS



SACRED
CHRISM

creation that brought forth the olive tree; and the dove that returned to Noah with an olive branch. Next, the prayer asks the Father to bless the oil so that those who are anointed with it might bear the image of Christ, be freed from sin, and share in eternal life. This oil is used for Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, the sacraments that are not repeated.

The oils are all used for the spiritual health of disciples so that as Christians journey deeper into faith, they might be healed from sin and live within and according to the loving, healing, and prophetic presence of Christ, whose name we bear and with whom we were anointed.

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