
**‘UNTO THE HEALING OF THE SOUL AND BODY,
AND UNTO THE RELIEVING FROM EVERY
INFIRMITY OF BOTH BODY AND SOUL’
THE EUCHOLOGICAL TRADITION OF THE CHURCH
AND ASSUMED HUMAN SUFFERING**

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Abstract

Illness and suffering have marked the human existence ever since Adam. Due to the great impact that these afflictions have always had on human life, the Church has directed her attention towards them, has theologised about them, and has included them in her rituals in an attempt to help men understand and defeat them through a life of communion with the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. Through participation in the liturgical life of the Church, men can and do find healing for their physical and spiritual sufferings when they ascribe such important life experiences to their personal relationship with God, the only realm that provides answers and solutions to all human realities. The prayers for the sick that are read during the Mystery of Holy Unction are less concerned with the healing or health of the sick person, and more with entrusting the sufferer's whole being unto God's mercy and care, as He is the only ‘Physician of our souls and bodies’, He Who with His all-encompassing kindness and providence knows what a man needs to have in order to attain everlasting happiness.

Keywords: disease, suffering, sin, Holy Unction, prayer for the sick

1. Introduction

In this article we intend to show that the Holy Liturgy has been the core of Christian religious practice from its early beginnings, upon and into which all of the sacramental acts of the Church were grafted. The Holy Liturgy has ritualised the Holy Mysteries all of the time, as the faithful have always believed that Christ is invisibly present and active in them. The Church has always celebrated only one unique Liturgy, an expanded service that challenged man's life in its entirety to grow into holiness and communion with the grace of the Kingdom to come. Even though through the centuries the sacramental ritual has evolved and

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formally detached itself from its Eucharistic matrix, its structure has preserved some traces and clues as to its origins.

2. Illness and suffering – realities of post-adamic life

Illness and suffering are intrinsically connected to the post-adamic existence. They circumscribe and accompany man's life from birth to death. Any disease is for each man a profound ontological experience that puts on trial his inner resources, 'calling into question' the authenticity of his faith, but also the essential values of his life. For modern society, suffering is a reprehensible fact and reality, in the context in which the industry of facility and of satisfying immediate pleasures has penetrated all the spheres of human existence.

"Excessive valorisation of biological life, considered as the only form of possible life for man, of psychosomatic health, regarded as a possession of a good that is limited almost exclusively to the material reality and for which the body appears as the essential organ, the fear of everything that might endanger, reduce or suppress this possession, and raising analgesia to the statute of value of civilisation and social finality, the fear of biological death, regarded as an absolute end of existence, all these make many people expect salvation from medicine and turn the physician into a new priest of modern times, a king with life and death rights upon them, a prophet of their destiny." [1]

Due to the major impact that illness and suffering have on human life, the Church has always paid great attention to these, including them in her teachings but also in her worship, in order to help man understand and overcome them through the life of communion with Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected One. Taking part in the liturgical life of the Church, man can find healing for the sufferings of his body and soul, situating these important life experiences in his relation to God, the only context in which all human realities find their answers and solutions.

3. Why do illness and suffering dwell in human life after the Saviour's Resurrection?

This is one of the great questions of Christianity to which the Holy Fathers have given a subtle answer, showing that through the whole economy of salvation, Jesus Christ eliminated sin from human nature, ended the devil's tyranny, changed the significance of death as passage to the eternal life, but He did not suppress the possibility of sin, the work of demons, or physical death so as not to force man's free will, which often becomes the cause of these failures and sufferings [1, p. 47].

Even if in the condition of his earthly life it is impossible for man to escape illness and not be crushed by age (for remaining in the same state is not a characteristic pertaining to this world, but to the next), however, the perspective through which all these deficiencies are experienced in Christianity is totally new: biological death is no longer a condemnation of nature, but of sin [2];

illnesses and suffering, even if they are consequences of sin and of the devil's work, become pedagogical means of divine providence in order for man to cleanse himself from sin and consolidate his relation with God.

4. The perspective of the ecclesiastical tradition concerning illness and suffering

The whole patristic tradition, as it appears expressed in the euchological texts of the Church, approaches health as a great gift that is constantly implored from God, but which must be rendered to the Creator through thanksgiving, observing the sacred commandments and offering one's own existence to God.

Illness accompanies man's life because of sin which still works in human nature, but it is limited to the physical nature of the body, being a way through which God addresses the man who is much too concerned with the material pleasures of the senses, rebuking and correcting him in order to offer him the lost health of the soul. In this respect, St. John Chrysostom remarks: "For since for the most part when the soul is diseased we feel no pain, but if the body receive though but a little hurt, we use every exertion to free it from its infirmity, because we are sensible of the infirmity, therefore God oftentimes punishes the body for the transgressions of the soul, so that by means of the scourging of the inferior part, the better part also may receive some healing" [3].

For Christians, suffering and illness are opportunities of spiritual progress, of persistence in patience and prayer, in acquiring humility, repentance, and meekness. Through these, man spiritualises himself and follows Christ, crucifying himself to this world, suffering with gratitude and patience in order to acquire the happiness of eternal life.

It is interesting to observe how this theology and conception coming from early Christianity engendered some liturgical texts integrated in the Holy Liturgy and later grouped in a special service, which received the name of the Mystery of anointing the sick or the Mystery of Holy Unction.

5. The Mystery of Holy Unction, mystery of the healing of body and soul

All the mysteries instituted and practiced by the Saviour are connected to each other and are inseparable, for Christ works through all of them, the One Who is united with every faithful through the visible matter, descending in the smallest necessities in order to fill it with the happiness of eternity.

This is also the perspective from which the Mystery of Holy Unction should be regarded, as a sacramental work of the Church through which Christ touches the body and soul of the suffering person in order to heal him and offer him the absolution of sins, so he becomes a living member of the Church able to receive the other Holy Sacraments. Illness and suffering are only the preamble of the prayers that compose this sacramental ritual, as the communion with Christ, the Physician of souls and bodies, is the only one that can bring human existence healing and relief.

5.1. Healing illnesses and suffering in the Apostolic era (James 5.15)

The apostolic practice of healing by anointing with oil is attested in the famous passage in the Epistle of Saint James: “Are any among you sick? Let them call for the presbyters of the Church: they should pray over them and anoint them with oil in the Name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will heal those who are sick and the Lord will raise them up. If they have committed sins, they will be forgiven.” (James 5.15)

This biblical text on which is founded the apostolic practice of prayer for the sick mentions the way in which this sacramental work was accomplished. Three distinct elements can be identified as follows: *a)* calling for the presbyters of the Church; *b)* anointing with oil ‘in the name of the Lord’, and *c)* the prayer of faith healing the sick of the illness of body and soul [4].

All these show that, in the early Church, the sacramental healing work was regarded as a work of Christ through visible servants, a work that was certainly integrated in the worship centred on the Holy Liturgy, being also closely connected to the Sacrament of Confession. ‘Calling the presbyters of the Church’ and the prayer for the sick refer to the way in which the Saint Apostles understood to continue the work of healing the suffering, begun by our Saviour. It is important to remark that in the apostolic era, when worship was based on improvisation, all the sacramental works of the Church were connected to the Holy Liturgy; the presence of priests in the house of the sick did not have the character of a ‘medical visit’, but was the expression of a liturgical practice involving a certain ritual [5]. Thus, the anointing with oil and the prayer were done ‘in the name of the Lord’, being not just a simple therapeutic practice of anointing with olive oil, largely spread in the ancient world, but a sacramental act linked to the name of Christ, an invocation which had an epiclesis character. Such simple epiclesis can be found in The Didache 10, 5 [6], where the expression ‘Maranatha’ has the imperative meaning of: ‘Come, Lord!’ [7], or in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, written around 200, in which the repeated invocation of the Saviour and of the Holy Spirit had an epiclesis character [8].

This testimony of Saint James also offers other important information on the way in which the Mystery of Holy Unction was celebrated. Hence, the sacramental ritual included the priests’ prayer and the anointing with oil of the sick, and the succession of these liturgical acts is indicated by the use of the participle aorist (‘ἄλειψαντες’) in the Greek text, which gives this meaning to the phrase: “Let them call for the presbyters of the Church: they should pray over them after anointing them with oil in the Name of the Lord” [9]. That is, first was the anointing with oil and then came the presbyters’ prayer, which made some researchers assert that there are no testimonies in the New and Old Testament about the blessing of the oil for the sick [9, p. 438].

It is certain that, from the unwritten tradition of the Church and the testimonies about the practice of Holy Unction in the first three centuries, it is known that the ritual included, from the beginning, a prayer of blessing of the oil at the beginning of the Liturgy, another one after the anointing with oil, and the

public confession of sins at the end of the Eucharistic synaxis [10]. This is the apostolic core of the ritual of Holy Unction.

The expression ‘the prayer of faith’ is the testimony of the sacramental character of the ritual described by Saint James the Apostle, as it shows that the health of the body, but also of the soul, was one of the common, not individual problems of the first Christian communities, and the imploration for healing done through the Mysteries of the Church is the sign of this communion and the warranty of its fulfilment in Christ. This phrase also indicates the indestructible connection between the Mystery of the Confession and that of the Holy Unction: “if they have committed sins, they will be forgiven.” The verbs ‘ἀφεθήσεται’ and ‘ἔξομολογεῖσθε’ certainly refer to the Mystery of Confession and the conditional ‘κἄν’ appears here in order to suggest the possibility of the sick person to confess his sins in the same complex ritual of healing the body and the soul [11].

It is clear that for the Christians in the early Church the healing of the body is closely connected to the healing of the soul, and the two sacraments were celebrated together in the Eucharistic Synaxis, as can be seen in the euchological texts written later.

5.2. The euchological texts for the sick in the Ancient Church Orders

This triptych: Confession – Unction – Eucharist is a given of the Apostolic Tradition, as the first Christians lived the sacramental life of the Church in its unity, celebrating all the Holy Sacraments, all Christ’s blessed works in and through the Liturgy.

From this perspective must be interpreted the first testimonies of the Ancient Church Orders about the Mystery of Holy Unction. Even if they refer only to one prayer for the blessing of the oil destined for the anointing of the sick, one must also postulate the Eucharistic celebration, as well as the confession of sins, because getting healing for the body was seen as inseparable from the healing of the soul from sins [11].

Thus, in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome, an early Church Order dating possibly from the third century, the oil for the sick is blessed at the Eucharistic Liturgy immediately after the consecration of bread and wine [12].

In the liturgical tradition of Alexandria, the oil was also blessed during the Liturgy, as is shown by the three prayers of blessing of the oil in the euchologion of Serapion of Thmuis [13]: one for the oil and water offered by the faithful at the Eucharist, the second one for the Great Myrrh, and the third for the oil of healing. It is important to notice that the first prayer, entitled ‘*Prayer for the oils and waters brought as offering*’, is part of the Eucharistic canon, taking place after people took communion [13, p. 67].

In this Euchologion there is also a prayer entitled ‘*Prayer for the oil of the sick or for bread or for water*’ which seems to be a singular prayer, but it must have been read in a liturgical context [13, p. 66].

It is obvious that in this epiclectic prayer man is regarded as a psychosomatic whole and healing is implored not only for the body, but also for the soul; the fact that in Serapion's Euchologion one cannot find any special prayer for the absolution of sins might lead one to suppose that it could be read in the Mystery of Confession [11].

In the apostolic Constitutions, a Church Order from the end of the fourth century, there appears a prayer with the title '*Prayer of thanksgiving for water and oil*', in which is implored the blessing of oil and water, so that they should be for the healing of the souls and bodies of the suffering people through the work of Christ [14]. The prayer was uttered in the Liturgy by the bishop who led the Eucharistic synaxis, and the text mentions that "if the bishop is not present, then the protos should bless the oil and water" [14, p. 233].

Such a prayer for the blessing of the oil can also be found in Testamentum Domini, a Syrian liturgical text from the fifth century, in which it is indicated that the priest, who is about to bless oil for the healing of the bodies and souls of the sick, should put in front of the altar that vessel [containing oil] and utterly obeying the prayer for the sick [15]. Some liturgists saw in the typical indication above mentioned referring to the oil vessel in front of the altar, a sign concerning the eucharistical context in which the oil for the anointing of the sick was blessed [16].

5.3. The connection between Eucharist – Confession - Unction in the liturgical codices of the VIII-XV centuries

This sacramental triptych: Eucharist – Confession – Unction can be traced in the main liturgical codices of the VIII-XV centuries, in which the ritual of the Mystery of healing the sick was subject to an unprecedented development in such a way that it ended up being performed separately from the Liturgy and the Mystery of Confession. From the original simplicity of its two prayers, one for the blessing of the oil and another one for the anointing of the sick, the ritual of Unction was changed to include other prayers and biblical pericopes, being performed on seven consecutive days, in seven Liturgies, celebrated by seven priests in seven different churches, also having its own Vespers and Matins. In this complex form, Holy Unction maintained its penitential character, or better said, of preparation for the Mystery of Confession and for receiving the Holy Eucharist.

The oldest known liturgical codex, Codex Barberini gr 336 from the VIIIth century, does not contain any ritual specific to Holy Unction, but it mentions only five prayers for the sick without explaining whether they were uttered in the Liturgy or apart from it [17]. The first three are prayers for the sick; the last two are for the blessing of the oil. Out of these, the first is a variant of the one used today for the unction: "Holy Father, Physician of bodies and souls" [17]. The fourth prayer, slightly modified, is used today to bless the oil: "O Lord, Who in Your mercy (ἐλέει) and bounties..." [17, p. 219-220].

In centuries X-XII, the ritual of Holy Unction diversified so much that, on the basis of the manuscripts, one could identify at least four different traditions of performing this service, that is, the Constantinopolitan tradition, represented by Mss Coislin 213, the Greek-Byzantine in the south of Italy, developed in Codex Grottaferrata Gb IV and GB X, the Sinaitic one, taken over also by Mount Athos, recorded in Mss Lavra 189, Sianiticus gr 960, Pantokrator 149 and Sianiticus gr 960, and the Jerusalemian one, known only in two Slavic manuscripts *PHB Coφ* and 1053 1054 [18]. A few of the above-mentioned manuscripts will be analyzed in order to indicate the way in which the Mystery of Holy Unction evolved from the simple form of the apostolic era to the one it has in the present Euchologions.

The Coislin 213 manuscript, preserved in the National Library in Paris, is a patriarchal euchologion, elaborated in 1027 for the use of priests at Hagia Sophia, the cathedral in Constantinople [19]. The rubrics show that it had to be celebrated in a special chapel by seven priests, on seven consecutive days. It has the following structure:

1. the Proskomedie is celebrated, using seven prosphoras;
2. each of the seven priests blesses in turn the oil [in his oil candle], in this manner: Psalm 50, a candle is filled with oil, then the prayer of blessing is said: “O Lord, Who in Your mercy and bounties...”; the candle with the blessed oil is lit;
3. the Eucharistic Liturgy, with the special prokeimenon, the Epistle, the Gospel and the koinonikon;
4. the Unction, after the prayer before the ambo (at the end of the Liturgy): Each priest takes a little oil [from his candle]; the troparion of the holy Unmercenarys and wonder-working Cosmas and Damian is sung; each priest says the prayer of the unction: “Holy Father, Physician of bodies and souls”; each priest anoints everyone in the house on the forehead, ears, chest, and hands; while the troparion of the holy Unmercenarys and wonder-working Cosmas and Damian is sung, the priests go into the whole house, anointing the doors, the windows, and the walls;
5. the end of the service (in the main room of the house): other troparia; incensing; the Gospel of the good Samaritan (Luke 10); the litany of fervent supplication; the Apolis;
6. end of the Liturgy; Psalm 33; distributing the Antidoron bread; the Apolis [20].

It is obvious that the service of Unction came to be so closely connected to the Liturgy that the Proskomedie became the preparation part for the eucharistic Synax, as well as for the Mystery of healing the sick, and the Liturgy was dedicated to this in such a manner that it received a Prokeimenon, an Epistle, and a special Gospel [20, p. 381], and Holy Unction was perfectly integrated in the Liturgy. The whole service was repeated seven days consecutively; every day a new priest celebrated, and during Great Lent, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts replaced the usual Eucharistic Liturgy. It is important to mention that this complex liturgical event was especially related to the period of

Great Lent, to the period of repentance par excellence in the life of the Church, being celebrated at the feast of St. Theodore on the first Saturday of the fasting period and on the Saturday of Lazarus [20], which indicates the close relation with the Mystery of Confession.

The XIIth century brought about new elements in the ritual of the Mystery of Holy Unction: there appear new troparia, new antiphons, and new typical indications. The order of this Mystery of healing the body and the soul came to integrate services from the cycle of the seven odes, such as Vespers and Matins, and its integration in the Liturgy was completed. Thus, in codex 680 of the National Library of Greece, the service of Holy Unction was placed at the beginning of the Liturgy, starting with psalm 50, then seven antiphons, seven litanies, and seven prayers before the liturgical Trisagion [21].

The most complex structure of the order of the Mystery of Holy Unction can be found in the codex Sinai Gr. 973. Here the order extended to seven consecutive days and required the participation of seven priests, and the ritual, preceded by Vespers, Panychida, and Matins with a special canon, was perfectly integrated in the Liturgy, comprising two great parts. A first part, that of the blessing of the oil, was celebrated after the Proskomedia through the participation of seven priests who uttered each a series of antiphons, troparia, a great litany, and a prayer for the blessing of the oil. The second part, dedicated to the anointing of the sick, was celebrated after the koinonikon and comprised psalm 50, seven different prayers, one for each priest, among which was the prayer of the anointing, "Holy Father, Physician of bodies...", after which the sick person was anointed on the forehead, nostrils, cheeks, neck, ears, and hands. The apolis was done, then the suffering person was taken home where his bed, walls, and doors were anointed, followed by the reading of the Gospel of Zacchaeus [21, p. 110].

In the XIIIth century, in the ritual of Holy Unction seven readings from the New Testament, seven Gospels, and seven prayers were introduced in such a way that all priests can say the same number of prayers in this ritual, a practice established by patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos (1255-1260) [22]. This led to the establishing of the seven units in the service of Holy Unction: prokeimenon, epistle, Alleluia, Gospel, prayer, prayed by every participant priest. Due to the complexity that developed through this fixed system of readings and prayers, the service of Holy Unction was separated from the Divine Liturgy, preserving, however, the blessing at the beginning of the Liturgy: "Blessed is the Kingdom...", but also the relation to the ritual of a special matins which has at its center the canon attributed to Arsenios (not the patriarch above-mentioned, but a certain Arsenios of Kerkyra, who lived in the Xth century [23]).

In the Byzantine period, the service of Holy Unction was completed and reached the present established form, preserving, however, in its structure elements referring to the complementarity and interdependence of the three mysteries: Eucharist, Confession and Unction. The prayers introduced have a prominent penitential character, expressing the fact that what is sought is the healing of the body, but also that of the soul, so that man with his whole being

can approach the Holy Eucharist, the cure for immortality and a medicine [24].

6. Conclusions

As a conclusion of this brief analysis of the way in which the Mystery of Holy Unction appeared and developed, one can assert that the Church impregnated Her prayers with the hope of resurrection and eternal life, binding every sacramental act to the celebration of the Holy Liturgy. The Holy Liturgy has been from the early beginnings the core of Christian worship, upon and into which all the sacramental acts of the Church were grafted. The Holy Mysteries were always celebrated in the Holy Liturgy, for there was the awareness of Christ's invisible presence and work through them. The Church celebrated only one unique, expanded Liturgy that challenged man's life in its entirety to grow into holiness and communion with the grace of the Kingdom to come. Even though through the centuries the sacramental ritual evolved and formally detached itself from its Eucharistic matrix, its structure has preserved some traces and clues as to its origins.

In the Mystery of Holy Unction, in the prayers for the sick, healing and health are not imperatives implored fervently and at any price; the one who suffers is first entrusted to God's mercy and care, the only 'Physician of bodies and souls', Who, through His providence, knows what is useful for man in order to obtain happiness in the life to come. That is the reason why the early Church celebrated this mystery with Confession and the Eucharist, having one purpose: man's growth in holiness as a whole, body and soul, sharing the pure life of Christ. Life's hardships allowed by God, illnesses, sufferings, and afflictions, are signs that God looks after and pays attention to us. Living the dynamics of Christ's life, reiterating both sacramentally, but also ethically and ascetically, the life of our Saviour, every Christian can join the Apostle of peoples in saying: "Now I rejoice in my suffering for your sake...I complete what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body which is the Church." (Colossians 1.24) The suffering of every Christian is an occasion for him to deepen his communion with Christ, for the Saviour constantly assumes, up to the end of time, the sufferings and afflictions of all people, as being of His mysterious Body. Through these, He wants to get closer to man's soul who searches for salvation and for the joy of eternal life. Therefore, the Mystery of Holy Unction must not be regarded as a thaumaturgic, magic, or medical act, but rather as a vivid way of touching Christ, Who gives His life to the members of His body, in order to enfold them in communion with Himself, a communion that culminates in the Eucharist, "the consummation of our life in Christ, which leaves no further happiness to be desired..." [25]

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