

## **Pastoral Clarifications on the Holy Sacrament of Anointing**

*By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

The Sacrament of Holy Unction, or the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, is a liturgical sacrament celebrated through a special service of prayer over oil, which is then used to anoint the sick “for the healing of soul and body,” as the service itself states. This sacrament may be celebrated either in homes or in churches. Unfortunately, in many places this practice has been forgotten, as if it had fallen out of use.

The Holy Church celebrates this sacrament in the days preceding the great feasts — such as the Nativity, Theophany, Pascha, and others — as a preparation for receiving the feast and for preparing the faithful who will approach Holy Communion.

### **Why is This Sacrament Celebrated Communally in Church before the Feasts?**

It is celebrated in order to prepare spiritually for the feast and to ready the faithful to partake of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Holy Communion requires preparation, readiness, and repentance.

Another reason for celebrating this sacrament before the feasts is the ancient custom whereby the faithful would approach Holy Communion only a few times during the year. Since these occasions were often associated with the great feasts, the Holy Church developed the practice of celebrating this sacrament for all the faithful in the church, preparing and blessing them beforehand.

### **When Did This Service Begin?**

The Epistle of Saint James in the New Testament gives us this instruction:

“Is anyone among you sick? 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.” (James 5:14)

A prayer for the blessing of oil is also mentioned in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a work dating back to the third century:

“O Lord our God, sanctify this oil and grant the gift of sanctification to those who distribute it and to those who receive it. With it kings,

priests, and prophets were anointed of old. Grant that we also, being anointed with it, may receive health of soul and body.”

### **Why is the Service Celebrated on Holy Wednesday Evening?**

This service entered the Antiochian and Greek liturgical traditions on Holy Wednesday during the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

If we read the text of the service, we notice that it speaks of both bodily and spiritual healing and therefore places great emphasis on repentance, a word that appears many times throughout the prayers. The service of Holy Unction is therefore, above all, a service of repentance.

For this reason, the service concludes with the Gospel Book being placed over the heads of the faithful while they bow down, and the priest reads the prayer of absolution for sins—the same prayer that is normally read over the penitent after the completion of the Sacrament of Confession.

In the Antiochian tradition, this sacrament is celebrated annually on Holy Wednesday because many of the faithful receive Holy Communion on Holy Thursday morning, when we commemorate the institution of the Mystical Supper.

Some parishes celebrate the Divine Liturgy on that day very early—before sunrise—so that workers and students may be able to attend. This is a practice that I encourage and leave to the pastoral discretion of the priests of the Archdiocese. Celebrating the Liturgy early is a great blessing and gives all the faithful the opportunity to participate and to approach the Holy Chalice.

When I began this practice in my parish as a priest, with the blessing of the metropolitan—starting Orthros and the Divine Liturgy at four o’clock in the morning on Holy Thursday—many people initially objected. Yet when I entered the church at 3:30 a.m. to prepare the Holy Gifts before the service began, I was surprised to find the church already full, with people seated and others standing because no seats remained!

### **May the Faithful Take Some of the Blessed Oil (Holy Unction) from this Service to Anoint Themselves?**

It is important to understand that the distinction between clergy and laity increased after the thirteenth century and became more pronounced after the fall of

Constantinople, partly out of concern that sacred things might fall into the hands of non-Christians. Over time, this distinction became exaggerated to the point that it obscured the royal priesthood that belongs to every baptized Christian.

It should also be remembered that the Church sometimes corrects improper practices by introducing a temporary restriction in the opposite direction. At times this corrective measure may appear contrary to the original tradition, but its purpose is to correct an abuse that has developed over time.

For example, when dozens of small containers filled with oil were lined up for distribution to the faithful, some people — whether out of ignorance or lack of reverence — mishandled the holy oil. For this reason, certain pastoral directives were issued at times forbidding the distribution of containers of holy oil to the faithful, in order to emphasize the sacredness of this holy sacrament and to prevent disorder, negligence, and irreverence.

However, when such directives remain in place for many years, people begin to regard them as a “sacred tradition.” As a result, the faithful may be deprived of the blessing of the holy oil in times of need—such as illness or various hardships.

In our time, it is often very difficult to call a priest to celebrate the full sacrament in homes (which requires at least an hour and a half) whenever someone becomes ill or enters the hospital. In addition, the number of priests is often insufficient to provide this service in every situation.

At the same time, the lived Orthodox tradition knows the practice of the faithful receiving blessed oil from churches or monasteries and anointing themselves with it as a blessing in times of illness, trials, or need.

### **What Should Be Done Today?**

The question therefore arises: Should we forbid the faithful from keeping holy oil in their homes, or should we give it to those who request it? And how should it be preserved?

First, we must distinguish between anointing with blessed oil and celebrating the sacrament itself, which may only be performed by a priest. Keeping the holy oil and using it does not mean that we have celebrated the sacrament; rather, we have received a blessing through the anointing.

For this reason, I advise priests to allow the faithful to take the oil after a brief pastoral explanation guiding them on how to use it and preserve it reverently in the home. Orthodox tradition recognizes its use particularly in times of illness or pain, as well as during periods of trial, sorrow, or distress. The faithful should first say a prayer and then anoint their foreheads or the place of pain with the holy oil, making the sign of the Cross.

### **How Should it Be Kept?**

The oil should be kept in the place dedicated to God in the home—the prayer corner, as it is often called in the Orthodox household—where the icons of Christ, the Theotokos, and the patron saints of the family are placed along with the vigil lamp. (I hope there is a prayer corner in every home.)

May God grant that these holy occasions return to you again and again with everlasting blessings.