**The Service of Holy Unction**

**Introduction**

In ancient Christian literature, one may find indirect testimonies of the Mystery of Unction in Saint Irenaeus of Lyons and in Origen. Later there are clear testimonies of it in Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, who have left prayers for the healing of the infirm which entered later into the rite of Unction, and likewise in Saint Cyril of Alexandria. In the fifth century, Pope Innocent I answered a series of questions concerning the Mystery of Unction, indicating in his answers that a) it should be performed “upon believers who are sick”; b) it may be performed also by a bishop, since one should not see in the words of the Apostle, let him call for the presbyters, any prohibition for a bishop to participate in the sacred action; c) this anointment may not be performed “on those undergoing ecclesiastical penance,” because it is a “Mystery,” and to those who are forbidden the other Mysteries, how can one allow only one?

The express purpose of the Sacrament of Holy Unction is healing and forgiveness. Since it is not always the will of God that there should be physical healing, the prayer of Christ that God’s will be done always remains as the proper context of the Sacrament. In addition, it is the clear intention of the Sacrament that through the anointing of the sick body the sufferings of the person should be sanctified and united to the sufferings of Christ. In this way, the wounds of the flesh are consecrated, and strength is given that the suffering of the diseased person may not be unto the death of his soul, but for eternal salvation in the resurrection and life of the Kingdom of God.

It is indeed the case that death inevitably comes. All must die, even those who in this life are given a reprieve through healing in order to have more time on the earth. Thus, the healing of the sick is not itself a final goal but is merely instrumental in that it is given by God as a sign of his mercy and as a grace for the further opportunity of man to live for him and for others in the life of this world. In the case where a person is obviously in the final moments of his earthly life, the Church has special prayers for the “separation of soul and body.” Thus, it is clear that the Sacrament of Holy Unction is for the sick-both the physically and mentally sick-and is not reserved for the moment of death. The Sacrament of Unction is not the last rites as is sometimes thought; the ritual of the anointing itself in no way indicates that it should be administered merely in extreme cases. Holy Unction is the Sacrament of the spiritual, physical, and mental healing of a sick person whatever the nature or the gravity of the illness may be.

**Orthodox Christian Celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Unction**

The Sacrament itself calls for seven priests, seven readings from the Epistles and Gospels, seven prayers, and seven anointings with oil specifically blessed during the service. Although it is not always possible to perform the sacrament in this way, the normal procedure is still to gather together as many priests and people as possible. The faithful come forward to be anointed with the Holy Unction, and at the end of the service, the priest anoints the faithful as he makes the sign of the cross on the forehead and top and palms of the hands saying, “For the healing of soul and body.”

**Order of the Service**

*Introductory Prayers and Psalms 143 & 51:*

In these Psalms, we confess our sinfulness before God and ask Him to cleanse us and make a “new and right spirit within us” (Psalm 51:10).

*Canon:*

In this series of verses that are read or sung, we ask God to show mercy upon us and cleanse our souls, to drive away all evil powers, to grant salvation to those who are sick or suffering, and to grant us the healing of our souls and bodies. At the end of several sets of verses, we ask God to renew our lives so that we may bless, thank, and glorify Him forever.

*Short Prayers or Troparia to the Saints:*

We pray to the saints – especially those who have helped the sick and suffering, and to those who have been martyred for the glory of God – and to the Mother of God to intercede for us for the salvation of our souls.

*Epistle and Gospel Lessons and Prayers:*

There are seven sets of Epistle and Gospel readings and prayers:

a. James 5:10-16; Luke: 10:25-37

b. Romans 15:1-7; Luke 19:1-10

c. I Corinthians 12:27-31;13:1-8; Matthew 10:1,5-8

d. II Corinthians 6:16-18, 7:1; Matthew 8:14-23

e. II Corinthians 1:8-11; Matthew 25:1-13

f. Galatians 5:22-6:2; Matthew 15:21-28

g. I Thessalonians 5:14-23; Matthew 9:9-13

Each of the seven prayers asks for the remission of our sins, for the healing of our souls and bodies, and for life everlasting.