
Olive oil has many uses, both functional and symbolic. It can be burned as a fuel to provide us with heat and light; it can sweeten and enrich our food; it can strengthen, soften, and polish our wooden and leather goods; it can heal and soothe our skin and condition our hair. The symbolic uses of oil reflect some of these physical properties. It has been used since ancient times to anoint kings and priests and to restore the sick.

Oil as a symbol reminds us of God's boundless generosity towards us, and of his never-ending love of us. When we use it to anoint people in the Church, it is more than merely a symbol or reminder. It becomes one of the channels by which God's power comes into the world, by which he blesses us with his Holy Spirit.

The oil is no different from any other olive oil, but it is made special by being set aside for God's purposes. God takes the ordinary things of this world, in this case olive oil, and makes them holy. He works through material things to show himself to the world and to bring people back to himself. Three different oils used for anointing are blessed by the bishop, traditionally on Maundy Thursday at the Chrism Eucharist – so called because one of the oils used is called 'chrism.'

The oil of the sick:

The rite of anointing the sick in mind or body, those about to undergo surgery, and those nearing death, is one of God's gifts to his people through his Church (James 5: 14-15). This kind of anointing is itself

a sacrament, and like all sacraments it is a means of God's grace, perhaps to cure the person who receives it, but always to reassure them of God's presence, and to give wholeness, comfort, and courage in whatever their suffering or trouble.

The oil of catechumens:

A 'catechumen' is somebody who is preparing to become a Christian, and so this oil is used to accompany the Rite of Baptism. When Peter acknowledged Jesus as 'the Christ' (Mark 8: 29), he was recognising him as the 'anointed one' of God (*Christos* in Greek, *Messiah* in Hebrew). Anointing at baptism points to the gift of the Holy Spirit, which comes to the newly baptized person as it did upon Christ at his baptism in the Jordan. In baptism we are 'born of water and the Spirit' (John 3: 5), the Holy Spirit which is the gift of Christ to his Church. This anointing also reminds us that at baptism we are made inheritors of the kingdom of God.

'God takes the ordinary things of this world... and makes them holy.'

The oil of chrism:

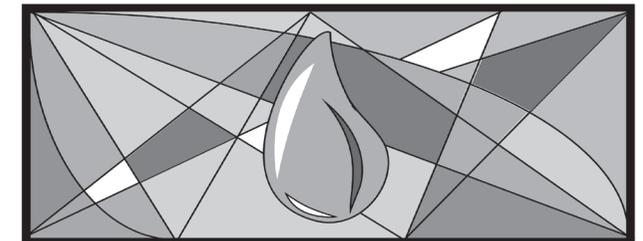
Chrism is the oil that can be used just after someone has been baptized, at Confirmation, and at the Ordination of Priests. It is used to anoint monarchs at their coronation, and also in the consecration of altars and church buildings. ('Consecration' means making holy or setting apart for God's purposes.) The oil of chrism differs from the other two in that it is not pure olive oil but mixed with balsam.

How oil is used

The oil is applied using the right thumb, or occasionally is poured on. It is usually applied in the form of a cross to remind us that all blessing come from the crucified Christ.

When anointing accompanies Baptism or Confirmation, the cross is marked in oil on the forehead: a sign that we are 'sealed' with the Holy Spirit (cp. Revelation 7: 3). The sick are anointed on the forehead and/or the affected part of their bodies. Those being ordained may be anointed on their hands. With both Confirmation and Ordination, anointing is in addition to the bishop's laying-on of hands.

In anointing as in all sacramental rites, God chooses the ordinary things of this world, and by his grace makes them extra-special. He then uses them to make his presence felt in the world. He does this when through the water of Baptism he gives new and eternal life to his people. He does this when he takes the bread and wine and returns them to his people in the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ. And he does this when, by the means of Holy Oils, he pours his healing and life-giving Spirit into the Church and upon her members.



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