

## Anointing

*In 1998 a man with whom I (Janet) played on a darts team was rushed to hospital. The diagnosis was serious: meningitis and tuberculosis contracted as a consequence of HIV/AIDS. Over the next few months I visited him regularly. He was a lapsed Catholic, but a friend of his had given him some holy water and he developed a habit of dabbing some on, hoping to invoke some sort of divine intervention in his recovery. Shortly afterwards I went to the Holy Land. He asked me to bring back more holy water. I filled a bottle with tap water from my hotel and brought it back, decanting some into his “holy water” vial before going to visit him.*

*I will never forget the moment I scattered the water and made the sign of the cross on his head and hands. We weren't in church, I wasn't ordained, and the water definitely wasn't “holy”—but at that moment Christ became present for both of us. My friend's face shone and tears fell down his cheeks. In his eyes he knew he was forgiven, loved, and free. From the church's perspective there was absolutely nothing in that act that qualified it to be a sacrament. And yet . . .*

### Anointing with Oil

**I**t might seem that, in writing a full chapter on “anointing,” the authors wish to rehash an argument already made in the previous chapter. This is not so. While “anointing of the sick,” or “extreme unction” as it was once called, is considered one of the seven sacraments in some Christian traditions, this is certainly not the only—or even most prominent—reason for using oil to anoint believers historically. This chapter is therefore included to trace the origins, history, and purposes of anointing as a Christian ritual; then to assess

the extent to which these forms of anointing might be considered a “sacrament” or “sacramental” practice.

## Anointing in Historical and Biblical Context

Anointing is the practice of taking oil, water, balm (oil mixed with balsam), or another substance, and scattering or rubbing it on a person’s body. As a ritual act it is usually carried out for one or more of three purposes:

- To invoke healing or power;
- To convey blessing or forgiveness; and
- To confirm membership or identity of an individual within a particular religious context.

It is not confined to any one religion, indeed there are records of anointing being practiced, with a variety of spiritual purposes, among cultures as varied as the Ancient Egyptian, Persian Zoroastrian, and indigenous Aboriginal peoples. It is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures as playing a key role in ancient Jewish religion to identify something as sacred or someone as holy. When Moses sets up the tabernacle place of meeting, God commands him thus:

You shall take the anointing-oil, and anoint the tabernacle and all that is in it, and consecrate it and all its furniture, so that it shall become holy. You shall also anoint the altar of burnt-offering and all its utensils, and consecrate the altar, so that the altar shall be most holy. You shall also anoint the basin with its stand, and consecrate it. Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall wash them with water, and put on Aaron the sacred vestments, and you shall anoint him and consecrate him, so that he may serve me as priest. You shall bring his sons also and put tunics on them, and anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may serve me as priests: and their anointing shall admit them to a perpetual priesthood throughout all generations to come. (Exod 40:9–15)

In the Hebrew Scriptures ritual anointing is nearly always accompanied by the making of sacrificial offerings; an act which, as we have already seen, was understood as a moment of grace, enabling God to step into the mundanity of the world and intervene.

Jesus himself is not recorded as anointing anyone with oil. Of course this does not mean he did not do it, but if anointing is understood to be an act symbolizing the presence of God, having God incarnate present in the

form of Jesus Christ removes any need for anointing. Indeed, the term “Messiah” means “anointed one,” and Jesus’ laying on of hands would have been enough. By contrast, the disciples are sent out practicing anointing in Jesus’ name (Mark 6:13).

As we have already noted, the issues arising from sacramental practices during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate how Jesus’ own practice of touch within ministry provides the model for his followers, then and now. In chapter 2, we saw that Jesus’ incarnation and his use of touch was not just “intimate and earthy” but also essential to human-divine encounters.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul encourages the members of the church in their new identity as Christians by telling them that “it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment” (2 Cor 1:21–22). The author of Hebrews advises the Jewish converts that they are made holy by how they express their faith: “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions” (Heb 1:9).

John, in his first letter, explains that the consequence of Christ’s anointing “teaches [them] about all things, and is true and is not a lie” (1 John 2:20, 27). A text often referred to in association with anointing of the sick as a sacrament is James 5:14: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.”

It is clear, then, that in the New Testament apostolic writings, there are two forms of anointing: first, that which has been bestowed by God as a blessing, in recognition of the recipient’s new identity as a Christian. The second is related to the healing of the sick.

## Two Types of Anointing in the Early Church

We know that, by the beginning of the third century, two types of anointing were commonplace in the church. Everett Ferguson describes one as “anointing the five senses of the body with oil consecrated by a bishop, laying on of hands, and prayer for the healing of the body and forgiveness of sins.”<sup>1</sup> However, it is clear from what the bishop and theologian Hippolytus (ca. 170–235 CE) writes that, as well as an anointing oil for “exorcism,” there was also another for “thanksgiving.” Not only did the early Christians imbibe sanctified oil of thanksgiving as part of their communal meals, but also both

1. Ferguson, “Sacraments,” 137.

types were incorporated into their baptism ceremony. The oil of exorcism was used to symbolize the forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit, and the thanksgiving oil to signify the recipient's new identity as a member of the Christian community.<sup>2</sup>

This form of anointing was similarly used at confirmation, or chrismation as it is also known. Rather than being a sacrament in its own right, anointing was a vital ritual activity incorporated into a sacramental act, used in a very similar way to foot washing as an ordinance in some Christian traditions on Maundy Thursday. This seems a logical consequence of being a Jesus-believing movement with a large proportion of members directly descended from Jews. In a tradition descended from Moses, it was through the act of anointing that those present were “made holy.” During the sacramental acts of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist—the three sacraments still identified as the most important in the Eastern tradition<sup>3</sup>—those participating were “made holy” by virtue of their identity “in Christ.”

### Anointing and the Christendom Church

The history of how the sacraments developed in the Christian church is well rehearsed elsewhere in this book. Suffice to say, it was during the eighth century—as East met West, Christianity encountered Islam, and the struggle for intellectual and land rights took hold—that anointing itself became utilized sacramentally by the church in the West. Its purpose was ostensibly to convey blessing or forgiveness, or to invoke healing. In reality its purpose, in a time when corporate cultural identities were in flux, was to consolidate the individual identities of those who were Christian—either spiritually or culturally—and to give them confidence that, as the chosen children of God, salvation and the promise of eternal life that went with it was assured. Meanwhile the Eastern Orthodox Church continued to utilize a much looser definition of sacrament: “a holy thing that brings together and unites in itself two aspects—the material/visible/human and the spiritual/invisible/divine.” Just as veneration of the cross and the use of icons were considered “sacramental,” so too was the preparation and blessing of the chrism (oil mixed with balsam) by a bishop.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of the Reformation controversy, with its furious exchanges about what constituted a sacrament, anointing had been split into two types:

2. Cuming, ed., *Hippolytus*, 6–10, 19–20.
3. Avvakumov, “Sacramental Ritual.”
4. Avvakumov, “Sacramental Ritual,” 254.

*unctio extrema*, to do with penance, and *unctio infirmorum*, to do with healing.<sup>5</sup> However, it wasn't that simple, as *unctio extrema*—the ritual that prepared someone for the afterlife—was considered sacramental, while *unctio infirmorum*—which symbolized the need for healing—was not. As we stated in the previous chapter: the Reformers, determined that coercive control and the abuses perpetrated by certain clergy and bishops should end, declared that any ritual based not on a direct command from Christ himself was not in itself sacramental.

Meanwhile in the East, the focus on redemption from sin was also prominent in the mind of Orthodox theologians such as Metrophanes Critopoulos (ca. 1589–1639), who considered the Christian life as being marked by the trinity of: reconciliation with the Father; incorporation into Christ's body through Holy Communion; and, the life of the Spirit in the soul, symbolized by *unctio infirmorum*. This “sacramental triad” is punctuated by the use of anointing, as are the other sacraments, particularly *unctio extrema*.<sup>6</sup> In the United States sacramental practice mirrored the traditions from which the migrants hailed. Anointing accompanied baptism and confirmation/chrisamation, as well as being administered to the sick and dying. However, anointing with “oil of thanksgiving” is rarely referred to as a common contemporary Christian practice on either side of the Atlantic.

It was at the Council of Florence in 1439 that the Western church declared that anointing “shall not be given to any except the sick who are in fear of death,” and it wasn't until 1972 that the subject was revisited by the Vatican. The term “in fear of death” was changed to “dangerously ill,” but still there was no revisitation of the idea that anointing, as a sacramental activity, be anything other than for forgiveness or healing as a redemptory process during times of crisis.<sup>7</sup> Certainly in his recent book, *Why Sacraments?*, Andrew Davison, writing from an Anglo-Catholic perspective, makes no allusion to the existence of, or need for, anointing with oil of thanksgiving. For him the sacrament of anointing is about achieving the salvation instituted through baptism and maintained through confirmation and eucharistic practice.<sup>8</sup> From an Episcopal perspective, Lizette Larson-Miller's examination of sacramentality focuses on the paschal mystery and real presence, rather than exploring rituals that might stretch her sacramental theology beyond baptism and the Eucharist. The many contributors to the *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, consisting of nearly seven hundred pages, make virtually no reference to

5. Walters, *Notes on the Sign*, 324.

6. Butcher, “Orthodox Sacramental Theology,” 334.

7. Davison, *Why Sacraments?*, 120.

8. Davison, *Why Sacraments?*, 120–21.

anointing other than the anointing of the sick. However, in certain traditions oil is still used to anoint infants when they are baptized. So while in academic circles it is not discussed, anointing with oil is still used as a symbol during sacramental activities.

### Anointing with Oil of Thanksgiving: Sacrament or Not?

It seems clear that, from the earliest evidence—i.e., in Scripture—anointing with “oil of thanksgiving” has never, by itself, been considered a sacrament. While the use of holy oil which equates with the early Christian church’s “oil of exorcism” continues to be used by those traditions who practice anointing of the sick as a sacrament, anointing with “oil of thanksgiving” is not. If anything it has been used ritually during another activity which is itself considered “sacramental.”

However, a further question remains: whether, as a ritual, the anointing of a person with “oil of thanksgiving” might be usefully termed “sacramental.” Certainly it had its purpose in the early church:

- As a symbol of a person’s new identity in Christ;
- To mark the coming of the Holy Spirit, and therefore the institution of their covenantal relationship with God; and
- As a sign of their initiation and place in the community of the church.

All of these things are right and proper uses of a symbolic activity which makes the ordinary holy, as practiced in the worship life the earliest Christians just as their Jewish forebears had before them. Today these purposes are still fulfilled through the enactment of liturgical and sacramental practices. Some are named as such, others are not. In setting the ritual within the qualifying criteria described in chapter 5, it is clear that it is the *tradition* within which the ritual is set which defines it. The oil of thanksgiving is a symbol: it signifies the *covenant* between God and the recipient; it marks their new *identity* in Christ; and, it is administered within the *context* of an act of Christian worship in a Christian community.