

## 19. Introduction to the Mystery of Holy Unction and Healing in the Church

Anointing for healing has been used by the Church since the time of the Apostles. The epistle of James (5:14) says the *presbyters* should anoint people for healing “in the name of the Lord.” In Western confessions, Unction is often associated primarily with “last rites.” While we may anoint those near death as part of their preparation (along with confession and communion), Holy Unction is for us a healing Mystery which we all stand in need of, and which is especially used for those with particular illnesses.

The service of Holy Unction is served in our tradition on Great and Holy Wednesday. All members of the Church are strongly encouraged to attend this service, the only time in the year when everyone receives this blessed Mystery. Although we may not all have a physical ailment to be healed of, everyone stands in need of spiritual healing. Still, countless miracles of physical healing do take place through this Mystery. The sicknesses spoken of in the Epistle of James certainly include ordinary physical ones. While God’s purpose for us is not to extend our life in this world indefinitely, often God uses physical healings to strengthen people’s faith for the purpose of coming to deeper spiritual healing. In any case, we should always keep in mind that the Lord’s ultimate goal is to lead us from this life into the heavenly, eternal life of His Kingdom.

Outside of Holy Week, Holy Unction is used as needed, especially in cases of extreme illness or devastating diagnoses. In such a case the entire service might be done either at the church or in someone’s home. In other cases of illness, the priest might simply use some of the reserved Holy Oil that was consecrated on Holy Wednesday, using a few appropriate prayers when visiting the sick and anointing them.

The very beautiful Rite of Unction contains exquisite hymns and prayers that describe the Church’s understanding of human illness and of Christ as our physician. They put illness in the proper context of God’s purpose for our lives, so that we don’t make an idol of physical health, but trust in God’s providence. Along with the opening prayers, Psalms, and the Canon prayed in the earlier part of the service, there is a series of seven Epistle readings, Gospel readings, Litanies, and prayers. At the end of the service, the Gospel book is held open over the heads of those gathered, signifying that it is by the hand of God, and through the saving work of Christ that our healing comes. The priest prays for the forgiveness of the sins of those gathered underneath the Gospel, and then those present venerate the Gospel book and are anointed.

As with other Mysteries or Sacraments of the Church, Holy Unction is used for those who are members of the Church. It should be prepared for with prayer and fasting beforehand. Also, it is meant to be used in conjunction with Confession. While the prayers of Unction ask that those being anointed be forgiven of all their sins, this presupposes that they have repented and confessed beforehand. In other words, it is not meant to be substituted for Confession, but to be used in cooperation with Confession — both medicines are necessary for our spiritual healing. There are other kinds of oil used for anointing, such as oil from *lampadas* burning before holy Relics. Such oil is a special blessing, but is distinct from the Mystery of Unction. Unction oil may only be administered by the priest, while blessed oil from relics, etc, may be taken home by the faithful and reverently used to anoint themselves and others for healing.