

Myron

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Back to Back Sacrament

After the water of the font comes the oil of the seal. The second sacrament the Church has received from her Lord is Chrismation — the anointing of the newly baptized with the Holy Myron — and the oil by which this mystery is conveyed is the most sanctified substance the Coptic Orthodox Church possesses. It is not merely blessed oil; it is, as St. Cyril of Jerusalem teaches, “no longer ordinary oil after the epiclesis of the Spirit, but the charism of Christ.” It has come down to us, the Fathers tell us, from a jar first compounded in the upper room of St. Mark the Evangelist, where the Apostles mixed pure olive oil with the very spices that had been placed upon the Body of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the tomb. Every new batch has been added to what remained of the old. Every baptized child among us today has been sealed with a few precious drops that can be traced, through an unbroken mixing, back to the linen cloth that was folded in Joseph of Arimathea's garden. This lesson walks the whole length of the tradition — the five oils of the Church in their ascending order of sanctification, the Old and New Testament witnesses to the sealing, the teaching of the Fathers, the rite of making, and the specific uses to which the Holy Myron is put in the life of the Church.

The Seal That Is Placed Upon Us

When a child is lifted from the baptismal font, the work of the sacrament is not yet complete. The Church has received from her Lord a second gift, intimately joined to the first, by which the baptized is sealed with the Holy Spirit and constituted a living member of the Body of Christ. This gift is conveyed by a single substance of extraordinary sanctity: the Holy Myron, the chrism. To anoint a Christian with the Holy Myron is to extend to him, in our own generation, the laying-on of hands that passed through the Apostles and that is carried in our own time by the Pope and the successors of the Apostles.

The word “chrism” comes from the same Greek root as the name Christos, the Anointed One. When St. Paul writes, “He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Corinthians 1:21–22), he is pointing exactly at the mystery we receive in the Holy Myron. The oil is the visible sign; the Spirit is the gift it conveys; and the gift is nothing less than Christ Himself extending His own anointing to the one just born again in the font.

The Holy Myron is therefore not a decoration of the sacrament of Baptism; it is the sacrament of the Spirit's seal. St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, and St. Ambrose all speak of it with a weight that the servant must learn to carry. The oil that is touched to the forehead and the hands and the feet of a newly baptized child is the oil that makes him Christ's own, claimed and marked forever for the

Day of Redemption (Ephesians 4:30).

The Five Oils of the Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church knows and uses five distinct sacred oils, each prepared, prayed over, and reserved for specific purposes. They rise, one above the next, in the degree of their sanctification. A servant who can distinguish them can teach his flock when each oil is given, when it is received, and what it is for.

The first is the Oil of the Lamp, called in our own tradition the Qandeel. This is the oil that burns continually before the icons of the saints in our churches. Because it carries the soft light of the sanctuary and has been gathered up into the prayers of many, it is considered a sacramental. It may be used to anoint anyone — Christian or not — as a sign of blessing, of protection, of the Church's prayer for one who has come near to her lamps.

The second is the Oil of a Service. This is an olive oil over which a portion of the Holy Scriptures has been read in the service of the Church — as, for example, on the apocalyptic evening when the book of Revelation is read in its entirety. Its sanctification rests on St. Paul's own teaching: "Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4–5). Unlike the Qandeel, this oil is given for anointing only to the faithful, who have been sealed already into the Body.

The third is the Oil of the Unction of the Sick. This oil is not simply blessed; it is the matter of a full sacrament. Through it the Holy Spirit works for the healing of the sick, both in the body and in the soul, alongside the gift of the forgiveness of sins. St. James has placed the sacrament into our hand plainly: "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. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14–15). The Oil of the Unction is, like every sacrament, a place where the Lord Himself comes to meet His child at the exact point of need.

The fourth is the Oil of the Ghalilaon, a name that has been understood to mean the "oil of rejoicing" or the "oil of the catechumens." It is compounded together with the Holy Myron, from the same spices, in the same rite, and is reserved for two closely related purposes: it anoints the catechumen at the time of baptism, and a portion of it is added to the baptismal water itself — after the Scripture readings, the three long prayers, and the Creed, just before the sanctification of the water. It is the oil that meets us on the very edge of the font.

The fifth, the highest, and the oil of which this lesson properly speaks, is the Holy Myron. It is the most sanctified oil in the Church; it is the oil of the chrismation that seals every baptized Christian; and it is the oil by which the Church herself, her altar, her liturgical vessels, her icons, and her baptismal tank are consecrated. It is the oil in which the apostolic tradition itself has been made visible to our senses.

The Old Testament Anointing Oil

When God gave Moses the pattern of the worship of Israel at the foot of Sinai, He did not leave the

matter of anointing to human invention. He specified the very recipe: “Moreover the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Also take for yourself quality spices — five hundred shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much sweet-smelling cinnamon (two hundred and fifty shekels), two hundred and fifty shekels of sweet-smelling cane, five hundred shekels of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. And you shall make from these a holy anointing oil, an ointment compounded according to the art of the perfumer. It shall be a holy anointing oil’” (Exodus 30:22–25).

The oil Moses compounded was reserved for sacred use. “You shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on man's flesh; nor shall you make any other like it, according to its composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it, or whoever puts any of it on an outsider, shall be cut off from his people’” (Exodus 30:31–33). This was an oil for the consecration of the priests and of the holy vessels of the tabernacle (Exodus 30:26–30; Leviticus 8:10–12; Numbers 7:1); it is implied that with it, or with oil of like sanctity, the prophets (1 Kings 19) and the kings of Israel were anointed (1 Samuel 9; 1 Samuel 16; 2 Samuel 2, 5; 1 Kings 1; 2 Kings 9).

What was most striking about this oil, to the Old Testament reader, was its restriction. It was not for the body of any ordinary Israelite; it was kept for priest, prophet, king, and the vessels of the house of God. That restriction was not abolished in the New Covenant — it was universalized. Under Christ, the priesthood is stretched out to include every baptized Christian; the house of God is stretched out to include every believer, whose body has become “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19). And so the oil itself, no longer hidden behind the veil, is laid upon every single child who comes through the waters of the font.

The New Testament Witness: Anointed, Sealed, Set Apart

The word “chrism” itself is not the only witness the New Testament gives to the anointing of the faithful. The verb the Apostle loves most is to seal. “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13–14). “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). A seal in the ancient world was a mark of ownership pressed into hot wax; it was not easily effaced. So with the Holy Spirit upon us through the Holy Myron: we have been marked as belonging to Another.

St. John, in his first epistle, speaks of the same reality with the word *chrisma* itself: “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things” (1 John 2:20); “The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you... and as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things... just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him” (1 John 2:27). The anointing is not a one-time event that fades from memory; it abides. The gift the Church gives the newly baptized is a gift that does not leave him for the rest of his life.

And because the anointed Christian has become, in his very body, a temple of the living God, the Apostle's words acquire a startling concreteness. “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and

that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (1 Corinthians 3:16–17). “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The Holy Myron places the tabernacle inside us; the Christian life is the long learning to live as its priests.

The Fathers and the Ancient Tradition

The Holy Myron is not named explicitly in the New Testament by that word. But the Fathers of the Church — from the second century onward, with one voice — speak of it, and they speak of it as a tradition received from the Apostles themselves.

“Anointing with oil consecrated according to ancient custom.” — St. Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition

“We are baptized with visible water and visible chrism according to the tradition of the Church.” — Origen, Commentary on Romans V.8

“This oil is not just any oil after the epiclesis of the Spirit; it becomes the charism of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit through the presence of the deity.” — St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis III

To these three witnesses the Church joins the testimony of St. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, St. Ambrose of Milan, and many of the Alexandrian Fathers. All of them take the Holy Myron for granted as part of the rite of Christian initiation, and all of them describe it with language very near to our own.

The earliest detailed account of the history of the Holy Myron that has come down to us is the work of a fourteenth-century Coptic priest and scholar, Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar, in his *Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah* — the *Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service*. According to his account, the holy Apostles took from the spices that had been used to anoint the body of our Lord, Jesus Christ, at His burial (cf. John 19:38–40), added pure olive oil to them, and prayed over the mixture in Upper Zion — the first Christian church, which was in the house of St. Mark the Evangelist. The Apostles divided this holy oil among themselves, so that wherever they preached, those who believed and were baptized might be anointed with it as a seal; and they commanded that in every subsequent making, the old Myron should be added to the new, that the original Myron might never be lost.

The making continued in sufficient quantities for the life of the Church until the days of Pope Athanasius the Apostolic of Alexandria. In a period of shortage, Pope Athanasius wrote to the other Patriarchs, and together they formalized the rite — writing down the prayers, standardizing the procedure, and re-making the Holy Myron in the quantities the ever-growing Church required. To this day, every Coptic Orthodox Christian sealed with the Myron is sealed with an oil that contains, in trace, a portion of that original batch.

The Rite by which the Holy Myron Is Made

The making of the Holy Myron is a rite of the whole Church, reserved to the Patriarch and concelebrated by the bishops. It is prepared so that the oil does not spoil — a preservation likely rooted in ancient Egyptian expertise that Moses himself learned and used (Exodus 30).

Twenty to thirty different spices, including balsam, are mixed into pure olive oil and cooked over low heat with continuous stirring. The cooking is typically repeated two to four times, so that the chemistry of the spices gives the oil its proper consistency and character. All through the cooking, prayers are recited — the 150 Psalms, if the making falls in the last week of Great Lent, or the prayers of Pascha, if the making falls in Holy Week itself.

Once the cooking is complete, the oil is clarified of the spices. Over that clarified oil the prayers of sanctification are offered, invoking the Holy Spirit upon it, that it may become the Chrism of Christ and the seal of the Spirit upon those who will be anointed with it. The remaining spices, now saturated with the prayer of the whole Church, are not discarded. Over them a fresh batch of pure olive oil is cooked and prayed over in its own rite; this is the Ghalilaon, the oil of the catechumens, which will be poured into the baptismal waters and anointed upon those who will enter them.

Both oils are kept in a place of honor beneath the altar until after the Feast of the Resurrection. On the Monday after the Feast — the Monday of the Bright Week, when the Church is still living inside the open tomb — the previous batch of Myron and Ghalilaon is mixed with the new. In this way a portion of the spices that were laid upon the Body of our Lord in the tomb is kept continuously present in every drop of Myron that will anoint a Christian of our own generation.

Where the Holy Myron Is Placed

The Holy Myron is given sparingly, for specific purposes, and only by those whom the Church has ordained to give it. The servant does not handle it casually; he speaks of it soberly, because it is the most sanctified substance the Church possesses.

Its first use is in the sacrament of Baptism itself. The Holy Myron is added to the water of the font, so that the one who is baptized may truly be born “of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). Because the Myron contains the spices that had lain on the Body of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the tomb, the water into which it has been poured becomes, in a very literal way, the grave of the Lord Himself. The Christian who is plunged into it dies with Him, is buried with Him, and is raised with Him in an actual participation in His death and Resurrection (Romans 6:3–5).

Its second and most visible use is in the sacrament of Chrismation, sometimes called Confirmation. After coming up from the font, the newly baptized is anointed with the Holy Myron in thirty-six separate signings — over the crown of the head, the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, the mouth, the back (twice), the heart (twice), and six times over the main joints of each arm and each leg. In this pattern of anointings, the body that has just been baptized is made, down to its joints, the temple of the Holy Spirit. The whole person is sealed for the Day of Redemption.

Its third use is in the consecration of the sacred places and vessels of the Church. The church building

itself is anointed; the altar, and the altar board upon which the paten and chalice will rest; the paten, the chalice, the spoon, the star that is laid over the paten; the two corporals for the paten and the chalice; the artophorion in which the Eucharist is carried to the sick and the imprisoned; the brusfarin; the icons through which we venerate the Lord and His saints; and the baptismal tank. All of these are set apart from ordinary use by the touch of the Holy Myron. The other furnishings of the church do not require this anointing.

Historically, the Holy Myron has also been used in the ordination of priests and the consecration of bishops; this usage is preserved to the present in the Latin and Armenian Churches, and is remembered in some of our own older practices.

May the Lord who sealed us in our own baptism with the Holy Myron of His Apostles keep that seal unbroken upon us. May He remind us, when we are tempted, that we are not our own, for we were bought at a price and anointed with the very spices of His tomb. And may every servant who touches the Myron — whether as a father at a baptism, or as a deacon assisting at the altar, or simply as a member of the faithful — touch it with the trembling love of one who has been given more than he can measure.



Review Questions

1. Who made note of the earliest accounts of Myron's history? (A: Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar)
2. True or false? Myron is used for more than one sacrament in the Holy Church. (A: True)
3. True or false? An oil that is analogous to the Holy Myron is what God told Moses to make after the exodus out of Egypt. (A: True)
4. What is another name for the 'oil of the lamp?' (A: Qandeel)
5. True or false? The Holy Myron is the oil with the lowest level of sanctification in the church. (A: False)



Books & References

Scripture: Exodus 30:22–33, 26–30 • Leviticus 8:10–12 • Numbers 7:1 • 1 Samuel 9; 16 • 2 Samuel 2; 5 • 1 Kings 1; 19 • 2 Kings 9 • Matthew 28:19 • John 3:5; 19:38–40 • Romans 6:3–5 • 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19–20 • 2 Corinthians 1:21–22 • Ephesians 1:13–14; 4:30 • 1 Timothy 4:4–5 • James 5:14–15 • 1 John 2:20, 27

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Seven Sacraments of the Church.
- Abu I-Barakat Ibn Kabar, Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah (The Lamp of Darkness in Clarifying the Service).
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis III: On Chrismation.
- St. Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition.
- Origen, Commentary on Romans.
- Angelo Di Berardino (ed.), Encyclopedia of the Early Church.
- <https://suscopts.org/resources/literature/539/the-holy-myron/>

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.