



HOLY MYRON

The Holy Myron (*Gr.* perfume; fragrant oil) is the oil with the highest level of sanctification in the Christian Church and in which is the grace of the Holy Spirit for the sanctifying and consecration to God of whatever it is used in anointing.

LEVELS OF SANCTIFICATION:

In our Coptic Orthodox Church rite, there are different levels of sanctification of oil:

- 1) Oil of the *qandeel*, or lamp in the church, typically in front of the icon of a saint. This oil can be used to anoint anyone, either Christian or non-Christian.
- 2) Oil over which we read a portion of the Holy Bible like in the night of the Apocalypse when we read the book of *Revelation*. This is a holy oil according to what St. Paul writes: “For 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*” (*1Tim.* 4:4-5). This oil is reserved for anointing only the faithful.
- 3) Oil of the sacrament of the Unction of the Sick. This is a sacrament in which the Holy Spirit works for the healing of not only the body, but also the soul and spirit through the repentance of the individual and the forgiveness of sins. Just as St. James writes: “*Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters 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).
- 4) Oil of Ghalilaon, or Kallilaion (i.e. cultivated olive oil, or pure olive oil). There are other explanations that give it the meaning of “oil of rejoicing” or “oil of catechumens”. This oil is made along with the Holy Myron and is used to anoint the catechumens at the time of their baptism. Some of it is also placed in the baptismal water after the Scripture readings, the three long prayers, and the Creed, and before the liturgy of sanctification of the water.
- 5) Holy Myron.

BIBLICAL REFERENCES:

1) Old Testament:

An oil that is analogous to the Holy Myron is that which God told Moses to make after the exodus out of Egypt involving pure olive oil and certain spices: “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).

It was a sacred oil only to be used for the consecration of certain people or things to God: ““And 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).

God specified to Moses exactly who and what it should be used for – the anointing of priests and the holy items in the tabernacle (*Exodus* 30:26-30; *Leviticus* 8:10-12; *Numbers* 7:1). Prophets (*1Kings* 19) and kings (*1Samuel* 9; *1Samuel* 16; *2Samuel* 2, 5; *1Kings* 1; *2Kings* 9) were also anointed with oil, however, it is not specified that this particular oil was used.

2) New Testament:

In the Old Testament, it was forbidden for the holy anointing oil to touch any person, only the priest and the holy items in the tabernacle. In the New Testament, not only is the church and some things in the church anointed, all of the faithful are anointed with the Holy Myron. Although there is no specific reference to the use of this particular oil in the New Testament, there is the mention of an “anointing” or being “sealed” by the Holy Spirit:

- “Now 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” (2Corinthians 1:21-22).
- “¹³ 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**, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14).
- “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were **sealed** for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30).
- “But you have **an anointing from the Holy One**, and you know all things” (1John 2:20).
- “But the **anointing which you have received from Him abides in you**, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the **same anointing teaches you concerning all things**, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him” (1John 2:27).

In addition, just as items in the tabernacle (that were later placed in the temple) were anointed with the holy anointing oil of the Old Testament, so also the faithful in the New Testament who are anointed with the Holy Myron are temples of the Holy Spirit:

- “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” (1Corinthians 3:16-17).
- “Or do you not know that 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” (1Corinthians 6:19-20).

3) Fathers of the Church:

Even though there is no clear mentioning of the Holy Myron in the New Testament, the Fathers of the Church and scholars like St. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, St. Hippolytus, Origen, St. Ambrose, and St. Cyril of Jerusalem, do speak about the Holy Myron and how they received its use in anointing by tradition. For example, St. Hippolytus in his *Apostolic Tradition*, speaks of “anointing with oil consecrated according to ancient custom” (quoted in Berardino, *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, v. 1, p. 190). Origen, in writing about baptism and confirmation, says it very clearly: “We are baptized with visible water and visible chrism according to the tradition of the church” (in *Rom. Comm.* V, 8; quoted in Berardino, *ibid.*). St. Cyril of Jerusalem goes into further detail in speaking about the grace of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Myron: “this oil is not just any oil after the epiclesis of the Spirit, it becomes charism of Christ and power of the Holy Spirit through the presence of the deity” (*Cat.* 21, 3; quoted in Berardino, *ibid.*).

HISTORY OF THE MAKING OF THE HOLY MYRON:

Although the early fathers and scholars mention the use of the Holy Myron, the earliest accounts of its history is documented by Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar, a 14th century Coptic priest and scholar, in his book *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 were used to anoint the body of our Lord Jesus Christ when he was buried (cf. *John* 19:38-40), added pure olive oil to it, and prayed over it in Upper Zion, the first Christian church which was in the house of St. Mark the Evangelist.

This holy oil was then distributed amongst the apostles so that wherever they preached, those who believed and were baptized would be anointed with it as a seal. They also commanded that whenever a new batch of Holy Myron was made, that they add to it the old Holy Myron to keep the first Holy Myron continually with all that would be made afterwards.

The Holy Myron continued to be made in sufficient quantities until the days of Pope Athanasius the Apostolic of Alexandria. Since there was a shortage in those days, he wrote to the other Patriarchs in order to formalize the prayers by writing them down for the making of the Holy Myron and to make it again.

According to the available resources, the Holy Myron in the Church of Egypt has been made 34 times of which 7 times have been during the era of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.

RITE OF MAKING HOLY MYRON

The rite of making the Holy Myron and the Ghalilaon is done in a manner that the oil never goes bad. This is most likely an art that was perfected by the ancient Egyptians and that Moses learned and used in making the holy anointing oil as commanded by God. Also notice that it was the Patriarch of Alexandria, St. Athanasius the Apostolic, that invited the other Patriarchs to make the Holy Myron and to write down the prayers.

There are approximately 20 to 30 different spices, including balsam, that are mixed into pure olive oil and cooked over low heat while stirring. This may need to be done a few times, typically two to four, in order for the oil to become a certain consistency as a result of the chemicals in those spices.

While cooking, there are certain prayers being recited. The typical dates in the year when the Holy Myron is made are either the last week of Great Lent or Holy Week itself. So either the 150 Psalms are prayed while cooking and/or the prayers of Holy Week are being recited.

Once the cooking is completed, the oil that is cleared from the spices is prayed over for its sanctification and for the grace of the Holy Spirit to work through that oil to sanctify and consecrate whatever it is used to anoint. The spices are kept and a new batch of pure olive oil is cooked with them. This becomes the Ghalilaon and different prayers are prayed over this oil. As mentioned above, this particular oil is reserved for those who are to be baptized and the baptismal water.

These oils are kept under the altar until after the Feast of the Resurrection. On the Monday after the Feast, the previous Myron and Ghalilaon that were made are mixed with the new in order to preserve a portion of the spices that were on the body and shroud of our Lord Jesus Christ in the tomb.

WHEN IS THE HOLY MYRON USED?

The Holy Myron is only used in specific rites and for consecrating certain sacred items in the church:

- 1) **Baptism:** In the rite of baptism, the Holy Myron is mixed with the water in the baptismal font so that the person baptized is born of “water and the Spirit”: “Most assuredly, I say to you, **unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God**” (*John 3:5*). Also, since the Holy Myron contains the spices that were on the body of our Lord Jesus Christ in the tomb, when mixed with the baptismal water, it grants that the person baptized die and be buried with Christ.
- 2) **Confirmation:** The newly baptized are anointed with the Holy Myron 36 times (over the top of the head, eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, back (twice), heart (twice), and 6 times over the main joints in each of the arms and legs). In this way, the person is sealed with the Holy Spirit by being anointed with the Holy Myron.
- 3) **Consecration** of the church, altar, altar board, paten, star, chalice, spoon, two corporals for the paten and chalice, *artophorion* (used to give communion to the sick and prisoners), *brusfarin*, icons, and baptismal tank. The other items in the church do not require anointing with the Holy Myron.
- 4) There are some references as to the Holy Myron being used in the ordination of priests and consecration of bishops in the past. It is used in the Latin and Armenian Churches for this purpose.

REFERENCES

- 1) Burmester, O.H.E., *The Egyptian or Coptic Church, A Detailed Description of Her Liturgical Services and the Rites and Ceremonies Observed in the Administration of Her Sacraments*, Cairo, 1967.
- 2) Abu l-Barakat Ibn Kabar, *Misbah az-Zulmah fi idah al-khidmah*, Cairo, 1971.
- 3) Berardino, Angelo di, *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, translated by Walford, A. Cambridge 1992.
- 4) Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa, *Tartib al-kahanut*, manuscript.
- 5) Pope Gabriel V, *at-Tartib at-taqsi*.

QUESTIONS:

- 1) How many levels of sanctification of oil do we have in the Coptic Orthodox Church? Why is the Holy Myron the highest level?
- 2) Where in the Holy Bible is the mentioning of “anointing” and being “sealed” by the Holy Spirit?
- 3) In what circumstances is the Holy Myron used?