

The Three Holy Oils: Their Origins & Their Uses

by J. Robert Wright

Writing these words in this post-Easter season, and having been invited during the Holy Week just past to preach for the chrism mass in the diocese of Southeast Florida at the beautiful Cathedral of the Holy Trinity there in Miami, my thoughts were turned for this reason to the subject of the three holy oils, their origins and uses. Although not considering myself a sufficiently specialized expert in this area to publish a specialized article on this subject in some obscure scholarly periodical, I do consider myself to know enough to be able to compose some hopefully-useful comments that may be of interest to many Episcopalians, including most priests in most dioceses whose seminary training did not include any consideration of the history, theology, and uses of these three oils, which for American Anglicans are now brought to attention by the Prayer Book of 1979 in order to assist people in distinguishing each of the three, I have arranged these notes around the letters of abbreviation for them that typically appear on their containers (called stocks), followed by their earliest mentions in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (c. 210 A.D.).

OI

= I = *Oleum infirmorum*

= Oil of the Sick = Oil of Healing.

Made from olive oil only. Referenced in Hippolytus para. 5 as the oil “with which

you anointed kings, priests, and prophets” (probably indicates that Hippolytus thought of this as being the original one “holy oil”, undifferentiated into three sorts, from which the others came to be distinguished). Used for those seriously ill in body or mind, whether or not in danger of death. “Blessed” by the priest (or bishop): BCP 455.

OC

= *Oleum catechumenorum* = S

= *Oleum sanctum* = “Holy Oil”.

Made from olive oil only. Referenced in Hippolytus para. 21, where it is called “the oil of exorcism”. Also called “the oil of catechumens” because it is used to exorcise catechumens before proceeding to baptism/confirmation which would be done with the oil of chrism. Also used in the western church after the Gregorian reform period of the 11th century for coronations on the European continent and for a time in England, because it gave royalty a lower status than the oil of chrism, previously used, which had tended to imply a quasi-priestly status. For some reason, the pre-1969 Roman rite used this oil, rather than chrism, for ordinations to the priesthood. Seldom used by Anglicans today, and only by bishops, or priests designated by them, in exorcisms of persons (which is, by implication, what happens at baptism). See *Book of Occasional*

Services, 174 (page number varies in different editions).

SC

= *Sanctum chrisma* = C = Chrism.

Made from olive oil and balsam (= balm = aromatic gum resin or other fragrant perfume).

Referenced in Hippolytus para. 21, where it is called “oil of thanksgiving”. Traditionally used for the three sacraments which, in scholastic terminology, “confer indelible character”, namely baptism, confirmation, and holy orders, as well as for coronations. Also used for consecrations of churches, altars, chalices, patens, and church bells (as recently by the bishop of Virginia). Prior to the Gregorian reform period of the 11th century used also for coronations of royals, which implied a quasi-priestly status to which the Gregorian reformers objected. Nonetheless used still today for English/Anglican coronations (chrism on the palms of both hands, on the breast, and on the crown of the head, as the choir sings “Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon in Zion, and they that rejoiced cried ‘Let the king live for ever’”). Generally used only by bishops, such as for ordinations, but also in some places by priests in Christian initiation. “Consecrated” by the bishop at baptism (BCP 307, 419) or in a separate service such as con-celebration at a cathedral on Maundy Thursday morning or earlier in Holy Week at a ‘mass of collegiality’ that may include a reaffirmation of

priestly vows copied after the service added to the Roman Missal by Paul VI in 1970. See (*Book of Occasional Services*, 234-36 (page numbers vary in different editions).

Bibliographical note: For a start in additional reading, see Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury 1981), index under “oil” and “oils”; Leonel L. Mitchell, *Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Great Fifty Days* (Boston: Cowley, 1996), 49-55; Byron D. Stuhlman, *Occasions of Grace: An Historical and Theological Study of the Pastoral Offices and Episcopal Services in the Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal 1995). There are many references to “oils” scattered throughout this last fine volume, for which the publisher failed to supply an index. For doubts about the authenticity of the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, see any of the works of Paul Bradshaw.

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