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# THE SEAL OF THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

## *Preparing Holy Chrism at The Ecumenical Patriarchate*

*by Mother Nectaria McLees*

The idea for this article was born out of an invigorating lecture given by Rev. Dr. Philip Zymaris, Assistant Professor of Liturgics at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology during the Spring 2012 Ecumenical Patriarchate Seminar. Father Zymaris is well-known for his extensive knowledge of liturgical history and teleturgics, and for his inspired teaching.

On April 7, 2012, a sunny spring morning celebrating Lazarus Saturday, a visitor to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople would have seen Orthodox clergy and workers carry a large icon, *Hope of the Hopeless*, to the courtyard. A crowd has gathered for the morning service and waits expectantly as the icon is set upright near a wood-frame building reminiscent of a summer pavilion, whose doors have been thrown open and decorated as if for a feast. Once the icon is in place, clergy and faithful surge forward to venerate. Many are native Orthodox of Greco-Roman ethnicity, now Turkish by nationality, whose roots reach back to late Byzantium. Like past generations of the city's families, they have come to witness one of the oldest rites in Christendom, the preparation of holy chrism at the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

*Opposite: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I adding pure olive oil during the preparation of the chrism, 1992.*

## The History of Anointing

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we first see a ritualized blessing with holy oil in the Old Testament anointing of prophets, priests, kings, the sacrificial altar, and even the Ark of the Covenant. The word “chrism,” meaning the oil used in the Orthodox sacrament of chrismation, is from the Greek χρίσμα (chrisma): ointment, unguent, and anointing. This leads us to the New Testament Χριστός (Christos), which refers to the Messiah as “the anointed One, Christ”. Chrism is alternatively called myrrh, from the Greek word *myrron*, and the New Testament *smyrna*, the myrrh given to the Infant Christ by the Magi, is from the same root.<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament practice of anointing with holy oil is recorded as early as the Book of Exodus:

“Moreover, the Lord said to Moses, “Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, two hundred and fifty, and of aromatic cane two hundred and fifty, and of cassia five hundred, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and of olive oil a hin; and you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; a holy anointing oil it shall be. And you shall anoint with it the tent of meeting and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lamp stand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils and the laver and its base; you shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy. And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. And you shall say to the people of Israel, “This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be poured upon the bodies of ordinary men, and you shall make no other like it in 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.” (Ex. 30:22–33)

<sup>1</sup> Fr. Philip Zymaris, presentation to Ecumenical Patriarchate class, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, on February 23, 2012 and in personal interview with Mother Nectaria McLees, March 2, 2012.

## Holy Chrism in the Early Church

Chrism, and the practice of chrismation as we know it today, does not appear in the New Testament. In the earliest decades of the Church, the apostles and bishops invoked the Holy Spirit on newly illumined Christians with a laying-on of hands either before or after the water immersion of baptism. In New Testament descriptions, these two rites lead to and are completed by the “breaking of bread,” that is to say, in the partaking of the Eucharist. As the Church grew and bishops could no longer personally officiate at each baptismal liturgy, their laying-on of hands was replaced by chrismation, an anointing with holy oil consecrated by each bishop and administered by his priests. For the same reason, priests were eventually given the right to officiate at the Eucharist without the bishop, and this new authority to liturgize and chrismate marked the birth of the parish.

Our earliest surviving prayer for the consecration of Christian holy oil is from the *Apostolic Tradition*, an early Christian text frequently ascribed to the theologian Hippolytus of Rome, and traditionally believed to date from around 215 AD.

If someone offers oil, he [the bishop] gives thanks in the same way as he has given thanks over the bread and the wine—not in the use of the same words, but rather in the same spirit—saying: “O God, as you make this oil holy, bestow your holiness upon those who are anointed with it. This is the oil with which you have anointed kings, priests, and prophets; grant that it may bring comfort to those who taste it, and health to those who use it.”<sup>2</sup>

It is unclear whether this prayer refers to the holy chrism used for chrismation and the reception of converts, or to the “Oil of Gladness” which has survived until today in the Orthodox baptismal liturgy and is applied before the three-fold immersion. The early Christian apologists Theophilus of Antioch (+181) and, particularly, Tertullian of Carthage (+ 220) also noted the use of holy oil. Tertullian here referred to chrism, as he notes that it was applied *after* the baptismal immersion. Theophilus remarks: “Wherefore we are called Christians on this account, because we are anointed with the oil of God.”<sup>3</sup> Tertullian continues:

<sup>2</sup> *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, accessed on March 3, 2012 at: [http://www.chronicon.net/chronicon-files/Burton\\_Scott\\_Easton\\_-\\_The\\_Apostolic\\_Tradition\\_of\\_Hippolytus\\_\(1934\).pdf](http://www.chronicon.net/chronicon-files/Burton_Scott_Easton_-_The_Apostolic_Tradition_of_Hippolytus_(1934).pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Theophilus, *Apologia ad Autolyicum*, Book I, Chapter 12.



After this, when we have issued from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction, a practice derived from the old discipline, wherein on entering the priesthood, men were wont to be anointed with oil from a horn, ever since Aaron was anointed by Moses. Whence Aaron is called ‘Christ,’ from the ‘chrism,’ which is ‘the unction’; which, when made spiritual, furnished an appropriate name to the Lord, because He was ‘anointed’ with the Spirit by God the Father, as written in the Acts: ‘For truly they were gathered together in this city against Thy Holy Son whom Thou hast anointed.’ Thus, too, in our case, the unction runs carnally (on the body) but profits spiritually; in the same way as the act of baptism itself too is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect spiritual, in that we are freed from sins.”<sup>4</sup>

The most detailed version of the practice is by St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) who describes how chrism, in the form of ointment or oil, was “symbolically applied to the forehead and the other organs of sense” and that the “ears, nostrils, and breast were each to be anointed.” St. Cyril taught that the “ointment is the seal of the covenant” of baptism. Being “anointed with the holy anointing oil of God” was the sign of a Christian [*Christos* here meaning “anointed one”]. It was a physical sign that one has received the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and it retains this meaning in Orthodoxy today. St. Cyril continues, “Having been counted worthy of this holy chrism, ye are called Christians, verifying the name also by your new birth. For before you were deemed worthy of this grace, ye had properly no right to this title, but were advancing on your way towards being Christians.”<sup>5</sup>

In the West, chrismation came to be called confirmation. It was eventually separated in time from the baptismal immersion and today in most Roman Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches, children baptized in infancy will usually be confirmed between ages twelve to fourteen. Unlike the East, where from early centuries priests presided over both baptism and chrismation, western priests only preside over the immersion portion of the baptismal service (which in later times became a sprinkling rather than immersion).

The episcopal right to administer chrismation was preserved in the West as a sign of the bishop’s headship and the unity of his see, as was his exclu-

4 Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 7. Accessed at <http://www.scripturecatholic.com/confirmation.html>

5 From *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by P. Schaff, Series II, Vol. 7, “St. Cyril of Jerusalem”, Lecture XXI, “On the Mysteries III”.

*Opposite: His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I on Holy Thursday.*

sive right to ordain. As dioceses grew in size it became more difficult for western bishops to be present at each baptismal service, thus confirmation was delayed until a bishop could visit. Father Philip Zymaris suggests that the present age of confirmation in the West may also be a post-Reformation practice to assure Protestants that Catholics and Anglicans also respect the rational maturity of the person, so heavily emphasized by reformers in Protestant polemics against Roman Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

### Uses of Holy Chrism

Today in the Orthodox Church, holy chrism is used primarily for the chrismation of newly baptized Christians. Chrismation is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and can be likened to a personal ordination, as at Pentecost when the apostles and disciples received the Holy Spirit, preparing them for their ministries to the world. We are not a full member of the Church until we are baptized and chrismated, when we become part of the “people of God,” the *laos* (which later became *laikos*, the origin of the word “lay”.) We become “little Christs” in this personal ordination as we are given His Spirit. Because Christ is the *Anointed One* par excellence, when we are anointed with chrism we become like Him.<sup>7</sup> As His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew says in his patriarchal encyclical of March 28, 2012 on the making of holy chrism (myrrh):

“...Those of us who have been baptized into Christ and chrismated with Holy Myrrh, grafted into the good olive tree of the Orthodox Church, are temples of the Holy Spirit that is within us, despite our various sins, both voluntary and involuntary, which alienate us from the Lord. “If we are faithless, yet He remains faithful. He cannot deny Himself.” (II Tim. 2:13)

This grace is bestowed on us through the Holy Myrrh because, as St. Dionysios the Areopagite states, the service of myrrh perfects divine knowledge and understanding, whereby in a sacred manner our ascent to and blessed communion with the divinity is accomplished. The Myrrh grants the sanctification of the Spirit and is

<sup>6</sup> Zymaris, *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> From Metropolitan Kallistos Ware: Through Chrismation every member of the Church becomes a prophet, and receives a share in the royal priesthood of Christ; all Christians alike, because they are chrismated, are called to act as conscious witnesses to the Truth. ‘You have an anointing (chrisma) from the Holy One, and know all things’”. (I John 2:20) *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, NY, 1997, pg. 279.



offered to the faithful as spiritual chrismation, a royal gift that sanctifies the soul and body....<sup>8</sup>

Holy chrism is also used for the reception of converts and apostates. Tradition shows us that this was not a repetition of the chrismation service, but rather a specific service of *reception*, with prayers referring to the apostate's return. In later centuries, the Orthodox Slavs departed from this practice, possibly because of polemics between Orthodox and Roman Catholic Uniates in those regions. Instead, for the reception of converts and apostates, Slavic churches began to employ the chrismation service, from the point immediately after the three-fold immersion of baptism to its conclusion.

To this day, rather than repeating the chrismation service, the Patriarchate of Constantinople and most other Greek-tradition churches continue to use a separate reception service for apostates and for converts previously baptized in a Trinitarian Christian denomination, with a distinctive prayer referring to reception, not to chrismation. However, holy chrism is used for anointing in both Slavic and Greek services.

Chrism is also used for the consecration of a church, an altar, or an *antimension*, for the blessing of chalices, patens and icons, and in the service for the translation of relics.<sup>9</sup>

After the 800's, an anointing with chrism was used at the coronation of a Byzantine and Russian emperor or tsar, a practice that continues until now for Roman Catholic and Anglican monarchs. That it was more than a ceremonial gesture for the new monarch was emphasized by Bishop Nectarios (Kontzevich), a Russian exile of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad:

The Tsar was and is anointed by God. This mystery is performed by the Church during the coronation, and the Anointed of God enters the Royal Doors into the altar, goes to the altar table and receives the Holy Mysteries as does the priest, with the Body and Blood taken separately. Thus the Holy Church emphasizes the great spiritual significance of the podvig [spiritual struggle] of ruling as a monarch.... He is the sacramental image, the carrier of the special power of the Grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bartholomew, His All Holiness, Patriarch, Encyclical Prot. No. 212, March 28, 2012. Ref. at: <http://full-of-grace-and-truth.blogspot.com/2012/04/on-sanctification-of-holy-myrrh-chrism.html>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Statement of Bishop Nectarios (Kontzevich) in Tsar-Martyr Nicholas II and His Family. Accessed at: <http://www.orthodox.net/russianm/nicholas-ii-tsar-martyr-and-his-family-01-of-05.html>



As for differences between East and West in the use of chrism, we may note that in the Eastern Orthodox Church there is no anointing of a deacon or priest at his ordination, nor of a bishop at his consecration; rather there is a laying-on of hands, an acclamation by the faithful, and a vesting of the new clergyman. This is in contrast to the western practice where, in the Roman Catholic and traditional Anglican and Lutheran churches, a priest is anointed with chrism at his ordination. Although in the West the term “unction” has sometimes colloquially referred to chrism, true unction is a different type of blessed oil, distinct from chrism used in both East and West exclusively for the mystery of holy unction. In neither East nor West is holy chrism used to anoint the ill.

### Who Consecrates Holy Chrism?

In the early Church each bishop had the authority to consecrate chrism (*myrrh*). By the 9th century, chrism was consecrated in the East by bishops of the most important sees (metropolitans), and later exclusively by patriarchs. Now, in Orthodoxy, it is consecrated only by the patriarchs of Serbia, Romania, Russia and Constantinople. All other autocephalous and self-governing churches receive it either from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople or the Russian Orthodox Church as a sign of Orthodox unity.<sup>11</sup> (An exception to this unifying tradition is the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), which over the past few decades has prepared and consecrated its own chrism.)<sup>12</sup>

11 From Pavlos Menesoglou on the tradition of the Ecumenical Patriarchate: “Although each bishop has the right to sanctify the Holy Chrism by his status as bishop, he is not permitted by canon law to do so. It appears that there are three reasons that restrict the right of sanctifying the Holy Chrism to the Ecumenical Patriarch. These reasons include: a) the scarcity of the materials and the difficulty for each bishop to prepare the Holy Chrism, b) the constant increase of dependence of the diocese on the head of the greater church and district, and c) the special position that the Ecumenical Patriarchate received through the centuries in relation to the other patriarchates of the East and that expresses the spiritual bond between the Church of Constantinople and the local churches of the people who received the Christian faith from its missionaries.

“In reality, this exclusive right to sanctify the Holy Chrism of the Ecumenical Patriarchate does not mean that local churches are dependent and subordinate to Constantinople. This act of receiving the Holy Chrism from the Ecumenical Patriarchate is a tangible and visible sign of the amity and bond of local churches, patriarchates, and autocephalous churches with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It is a necessary sign, not a sign of superiority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church, but an existing visible sign of unity among the cluster of local Orthodox churches. Nevertheless, in the Orthodox Church, the Holy Chrism, in addition to being sanctified in the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is sanctified in the contemporary patriarchates of Russia, Serbia and Romania.” (Pavlos Menesoglou, trans. of pamphlet, Athens: Apostolike Diakonia, 1992, pp. 13–19, and the author’s book (in Greek), *The Holy Chrism in the Eastern Orthodox Church*).

12 <http://oca.org/news/headline-news/metropolitan-jonah-to-consecrate-holy-chrism-during-holy-week>, accessed 02.03. 2012.

*Opposite: Copper cauldrons for the preparation of holy chrism in the Koulouwoukion.*

Fifty-five Orthodox hierarchs from around the world attended the consecration of myrrh at the Ecumenical Patriarchate during the Holy Week of 2012, including representatives from the senior patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, the Patriarchate of Serbia, the Autocephalous Churches of Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, the Czech Lands and Slovakia, and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America under the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Until today in the Roman Catholic and traditional Anglican and Lutheran churches, each bishop consecrates and administers his own chrism, often called “unction”.

### What is Holy Chrism Made Of?

Our oldest extant written list “concerning the materials of myrrh” dates from the eighth century and remains the basis of today’s recipe.<sup>13</sup> Chrism is based on virgin olive oil, which has been used from the beginning of olive cultivation as food, medicine (the Good Samaritan), for anointing, and as a source of light and joy. According to British author Laurence Durrell, the Sicilian white olive was once exclusively used to press the olive oil that went into holy chrism.<sup>14</sup> Sicily remained Byzantine until 965, and although there are few written references, oil from white olives could indeed have been used in both the Eastern and Western churches. Today, white olives grow only in Sicily, Malta and Spain.

Wine, balsam, and other plant derivatives, a total of fifty-seven ingredients, are added to the olive oil, although the exact recipe and amounts of each ingredient are secret. Because older chrism from a previous consecration is mixed with each new batch, tradition holds that holy chrism can be traced to the early Church.<sup>15</sup>

The fifty-seven ingredients of chrism include virgin olive oil, astringent red wine, flower water, rose water, pure mastic, gum Benjamin (a balsamic resin), primrose, Barbados aloe, long pepper, nutmeg, Malabar leaf (Indian bay leaf), Bohemian angelique, liquid amber bark, black pepper, pure myrrh, fragrant rush, balsam wood, sweet flag, Florentine iris, saffron, long aris-

13 Pavlos Menesoglou, translation of Greek pamphlet (Athens: Apostolike Diakonia, 1992), pp. 13–19, summarizing material from the author’s book (in Greek), *The Holy Chrism in the Eastern Orthodox Church*, Thessalonike: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1972, p.271. English trans. <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8420>

14 Durrell, Lawrence, *Sicilian Carousel*, Viking Press, 1976.

15 Ibid.

tolochia, balsam fruit, nut grass, myrtle berries, Celtic valerian, casse noir, Ben-nut, small cardamom, clove, cinnamon, wild spikenard, mace, Venetian turpentine oil, white pitch, terminalia fruit, marjoram, laudanum (rockrose resin used as a fixative), Indian spikenard, incense of Lebanon, white ginger, zerneb, fenugreek, helenium, Balsam of Gilead, Tonkin musk, true amber, and the oils of: Ceylonese cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, rose,<sup>16</sup> musk, citron, carpobalsamon, marjoram, laurel, rosemary, and spikenard.<sup>17</sup>

The significant ingredient balsam (also sometimes called myrrh or *myhron*) is made from a number of aromatic plants, the chief of which is the *Commiphora gileadensis* thorn bush. Resin from this thorn bush, which Middle Eastern Christians hold was the origin of the crown of thorns, goes into the making of balsam and, thus, of chrism. Native to the Eastern Mediterranean and particularly the Arabian Peninsula, this chrism is known in the Bible as the Balm of Gilead, and in later centuries as the Balsam of Mecca. Myrrh gum, which is used as incense, is commonly harvested from the related species *Commiphora myrrha* and is native to Yemen, Somalia, and eastern Ethiopia. (See Appendix I).<sup>18</sup>

### When is Holy Chrism Made?

In the Orthodox world, chrism is prepared and consecrated as needed, now roughly every ten years at the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Chrism was made at the Ecumenical Patriarchate during the 20th century in 1903, 1912, 1928, 1939, 1951, 1960, 1973, 1983, 1992, and in 2012. Chrism is made during Holy Week and the process lasts from Lazarus Saturday to Holy Thursday, when it is consecrated.<sup>19</sup>

### Where is Holy Chrism Made?

Today, at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, holy chrism is made in a small wood-frame building to the left of the main gate and next to the Church of St.

16 Traditionally from Aleandroupoli, the rose oil is now from Bulgaria.

17 Konstantinides, Joseph. *Holy Myrrh at the Ecumenical Patriarchate: Science and Religious Tradition* (in Greek). Athens 2000.

17 Konstantinides, Joseph. *Holy Myrrh at the Ecumenical Patriarchate: Science and Religious Tradition* (in Greek). Athens 2000.

18 Ibid. and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commiphora\\_gileadensis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commiphora_gileadensis), accessed on March 1, 2012.

19 Zymaris, ibid.



George called the *Hieron Kouvouklion*. Translated as the “holy cubicle” or “place of the cauldrons” from the Greek for cubicle (*kouvouklion*), the building is also sometimes called the “holy oven” or “the cookery”. Inside the *Hieron Kouvouklion* stand seven copper cauldrons connected with metal pipes that are used for the preparation of new chrism. Heated from below by wood fires fueled with old icons and brushwood, the cauldrons used today are of Pontian-made metal from 1880, with the inscription “Guild of Sereps”.<sup>20</sup>

### Who Makes the Chrism?

Chrism is prepared by the *Kosmetores Myrepsoi*—chemists and pharmacists from Constantinople and Greece who have had this title bestowed upon them by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. As we said earlier, the word *myrepsos* comes from the word *myron* (myrrh-perfume).” The *Archon Myrepsos* is the “Chief Perfumer”.<sup>21</sup>

In Byzantine times the official responsible for the making of the chrism was a high-ranking clergyman with the title of Grand Sacristan, the *Mega Skevophylax*, and the preparation would have taken place in the *skevophylaxion* (vestry) of Hagia Sophia. Eventually, the office of the *Mega Skevophylax* was replaced by the *Archon Myrepsos*. Laity were formerly not permitted to handle the chrism during or after its preparation or the vessels containing it, therefore today’s *myrepsoi* (which in Holy Week 2012 included a woman) undergo a sort of “temporary ordination” and are given a beribboned gold “Cross of Ministry” by the patriarch to wear for the duration of their four-day service. The *Archon* is given the *Lention*, a silk sash worn diagonally across his chest, reminiscent of a deacon’s orarion.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Zymaris, interview, and Menesoglu, *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> According to the tenth-century *Book of the Epoch*, issued during the reign of Leo the Wise, the *Myrepsoi* were one of the old traditional guilds of Constantinople, trading in spices, colourings or dyes, and perfumes, including incense, all of which were called *myrepsika*. The *myrepsoi* set up their tables on a row along the Mese, from the Chalke Gate up to the Milion. *Myrepsika* were exported mainly to the Arab world from the Byzantine provinces.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

*Opposite: Myrepsoi—chemists and pharmacists preparing the myrrh, 1992.*

## How is Holy Chrism Made?

The making of Chrism lasts from Lazarus Saturday to Holy Thursday:

1. On Lazarus Saturday the general preparations and decoration of the area for these services begins. Specifically on this day, a noted icon of the Phanar, the *Mother of God, Hope of the Hopeless*, is taken to the courtyard outside the *Hieron Kouvouklion*, where the chrism will be prepared. This icon of the Mother of God with the Infant Christ remains in the courtyard outside the building throughout the days of preparation.

2. On Palm Sunday the *myrepsoi* (in earlier centuries garbed in long white tunics, but now in white coats) are blessed by the patriarch at the end of the orthros service and receive their commission, crosses, and the head archon's *lention*. They are blessed for their task with the words, "*Kale dynamē*" (Good Strength! Godspeed!) and stand in a position of honor in the stalls directly opposite the patriarch during the Divine Liturgy of Palm Sunday.

3. After the service of Holy and Great Monday (a pre-sanctified vespereal liturgy on Monday morning) the patriarch and *myrepsoi* go to the *Hieron Kouvouklion* with its seven connected cauldrons, where the patriarch begins with a small *hagiasmos* service (blessing of the waters), with which he blesses the ingredients, utensils, and participants with holy water. He then marks the onset of the preparation of new chrism by pouring oil and wine in the sign of the cross into the cauldrons and adding some of the fragrant ingredients, including flower petals and sepals. With a candle, the patriarch then lights the fires under the cauldrons, which burn continuously from Monday to Thursday. Finally, he reads designated chapters from the Holy Gospel, and the *myropsoi* begin their work.

As the chrism is being prepared, the four Gospels are read by patriarchal and visiting hierarchs and clergy. On Holy Monday, Matthew is read; on Holy Tuesday, Mark; on Holy Wednesday, Luke; on Holy Thursday, John. This reading of the entire Gospel is also a traditional practice for all churches and monasteries doing the full cycle of services in Holy Week.)

On each of the following days until the consecration, the patriarch returns to the *Hieron Kouvouklion* to add sweet-smelling oils and wine to the mixture. Photos often show him pouring from an alabaster vase, like the woman in the Gospel who anointed Christ, and at one point he will add consecrated



chrism from previous years, thus linking the new chrism with the chrism of centuries past.<sup>23</sup>

4. On Holy and Great Tuesday, after the Divine Liturgy, a small Paraklesis, a supplicatory canon to the Theotokos, is sung. Prayers are offered for metropolitans, representatives of the autocephalous churches, and those who have contributed material, money, and effort to prepare the holy chrism.

5. On Holy and Great Wednesday morning, after the Divine Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts, the patriarch returns to the *Hieron Kouvouklion* for a final visit and, after a brief service places rose oil, musk, and other sweet-smelling oils in the simmering cauldrons. On this day, the physical preparation of the new chrism is complete.

During the days of preparation, clergy and laypeople are allowed to come and stir the cauldrons as a blessing. Once finished, the mixture is siphoned, filtered, distilled and the pure chrism is poured into silver urns. The filtered gum-like residue that is left over is made into incense and put into gold and silver paper boxes to be given as a blessing to metropolitans, *myrepsoi*, donors, and those present at the Holy Thursday liturgy.

6. On Wednesday afternoon the refined chrism is stored in vessels in the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Chapel of St. Andrew. These vessels include twelve large silver amphora with two handles inscribed "through the donations of pious Christians", a number of smaller silver vessels, a silver chrismatory vial for chrism and a hand-held alabaster vase, all of which stay in St. Andrew's chapel until Holy Thursday morning. The patriarch's vestments are put on the chapel's altar and the vestments of the other hierarchs are arranged in order in various patriarchal rooms in preparation for their vesting for the final service of consecration during Holy Thursday morning's vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil.

7. On Holy and Great Thursday, after Matins at the patriarchal chapel, the patriarch and other hierarchs vest and process to the tolling of bells from the Chapel of St. Andrew to the Church of St. George across the courtyard. During the procession, the Ecumenical Patriarch holds the small silver chrismatory, the most senior hierarch present carries the alabaster vase containing pre-sanctified chrism, and the hierarch next in seniority carries a vase of un-

<sup>23</sup> Zymaris interviews, *ibid.*



sanctified chrism.<sup>24</sup> The hierarchs who follow hold the smaller silver vessels with the newly-made chrism that will be sanctified. Twenty-four archimandrites, one on each side, carry the twelve large silver containers also filled with chrism for sanctification. The procession is flanked by representatives of the autocephalous churches who have come to participate in the service and obtain the chrism. In the Church of St. George, the twelve large silver urns are placed in front of the iconostasis on the *bema* and the smaller vessels are put around the altar. One small silver vessel of the chrism mixture is left unconsecrated and retained in the patriarchate to be used as medicine.

At this time the Thursday vesperal liturgy is celebrated and the chrism is consecrated, attended by Constantinople's Orthodox Christians, visiting Orthodox clergy and laity, and the dignitaries and representatives of other faiths. After the Cherubic Hymn and the Great Entrance, the patriarch places the small silver flask to the left of the paten and chalice, and the alabaster flask containing chrism from the last consecration to the right. After the anaphora and the exclamation: "And may the mercy of our great God...", the Grand Archimandrite chants, "Let us attend." Everyone kneels and a special prayer of consecration is read from the Great Euchologion.<sup>25</sup> (See Appendix II).

That this is done in the context of the Eucharist is important theologically and is analogous to the *fermentum* of the early Church, the portion of the Holy Eucharist consecrated by the local bishop and distributed to be mixed with all "Eucharists" consecrated in the surrounding churches of the region by his presbyters. This emphasized in a tangible way the unity around the local bishop and marked the beginning of parishes. Today, chrism distributed from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the other patriarchates who have this right remains a sign of Orthodox unity centered around a major hierarch.

8. Once the chrism is blessed and the liturgy ends, the clergy processes out in reverse order from their entrance to the *Myrrhophylakion* ("Place of Myrrh-Storage"), the old square stone tower behind the Church of St. George where the chrism will be stored. In 1600, when the Ecumenical Patriarchate moved

24 "History of Holy Myron", Ecumenical Patriarchate website, accessed at: <http://www.patriarchate.org/patriarchate/holymyron/history>

25 The earliest surviving written mention of this prayer is from the ninth-century Barberini codex, but it is assumed the prayer and service was much earlier. Revisions were made to the Great Euchologion, including the chrism consecration service, by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the latest version was published in 1960.

*Opposite: Silver flagons with newly prepared myrrh.*

onto this site of a former women's monastery dedicated to St. George, the tower was already present. Today the tower's top floor houses the patriarchal vestry, the middle floor contains the archives, and the bottom floor is the *Myrrhophylakion* where the chrism is stored.<sup>26</sup>

## Differences between Holy Chrism, Oil of Gladness, and Oil for Holy Unction

### *Holy Chrism*

Holy chrism, as we have discussed above, is blessed by the Ecumenical Patriarch (and other patriarchates with this right) approximately every decade, when the supply runs low. This is the source of the holy chrism with which Christians are anointed in the baptismal liturgy. The chrismation portion of the service takes place in the Byzantine rite directly after the three-fold immersion in the waters of baptism, when the chrism is administered from a special myrophylakio (a container with a special small sponge for the application of chrism) to specific parts of the body of the neophyte Christian. Although in today's practice we wipe off the chrism at the conclusion of the service, in the Greek tradition, a newly-baptized baby is not given a complete bath for three days so that remnants of holy chrism will not be washed from the skin. When the child is finally bathed, the water is poured into the ground or the sea, so as to not be stepped on.

In early Christianity, newly-baptized adults also refrained from washing for a week and would continue to wear their baptismal robes as an external sign of their anointing. In fact, the term "Bright Week" is derived from this practice of the newly-illuminated to publicly wear their robes for the week after their Paschal baptism. At the liturgy of the first Sunday after Pascha, the chrism was symbolically washed from the neophytes in a special ablution rite, and they were "tonsured" as a symbol of their dedication to God. The ablution rite, which survives to this day in the ablution prayers of the baptismal service, signifies that now it is time for the neophytes to internalize the external signs of their new life, to put on their "work clothes" and to witness to this life in their everyday dealings with people.

As was mentioned earlier, holy chrism is also used for the reception of converts and apostates, for the consecration of a church, altar, or an anti-

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

mension, for the blessing of chalices, patens and icons, in the coronation of an emperor or tsar, and in the service for the translation of relics.

### *The Oil of Gladness*

In the Byzantine rite of baptism the Oil of Gladness is holy, exorcized oil for anointing the senses at baptism prior to the three-fold immersion. This Oil of Gladness is distinct from the holy chrism dealt with above, which is administered *after* the three-fold immersion. The Oil of Gladness is blessed by the priest at each baptismal service in which it is used, and it is also poured into the baptismal font before the three-fold immersion. It is called “exorcised oil” because both the water used in baptism and the Oil of Gladness are exorcised of demonic influences in preparation for their contact with the neophyte. Various parts of the body (often the forehead, chest, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and hands, knees, feet and back) are anointed with this oil as a sign of the full restoration of the human being in baptism. In the Greek tradition, this is followed by a total body anointing with the same Oil of Gladness. In Slavic lands and other places with less access to olive oil, only the aforementioned parts of the body are anointed; the total anointing is omitted.

In the early Syriac tradition there was only one anointing in the baptism service, and that was with the Oil of Gladness, which apparently fulfilled both the role of the Oil of Gladness *and* chrism. (Indeed, it is referred to as *Kushma* in this tradition, which signifies a *sign* of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Immersion in water for baptism came subsequent to this, as an afterthought in the Syriac tradition, because Christ was first and foremost the *anointed one*—Christos—not the baptized one).

Today the Oil of Gladness is blessed with the following prayer:

Sovereign Lord and Master, God of our Fathers, Who didst send to them in the Ark of Noah a dove bearing a twig of olive in its beak as a sign of reconciliation and salvation from the Flood, and through these things prefigured the Mystery of Grace; and thereby have filled them that were under the Law with the Holy Spirit, and perfected them that are under Grace: do Thou Thyself bless this Oil by the power (+) and operation (+) and descent of the Holy Spirit (+) that it may become an anointing of incorruption, a shield of righteousness, a renewal of soul and body, and averting of every operation of the devil, to the removal of all evils from them that are anointed with it in faith, or that are partakers of it.

To Thy Glory, and to that of Thine Only-Begotten Son, and of Thine All; Holy, Good, and Life-creating Spirit, both now and ever, and to the ages of ages.

### *Oil for Holy Unction*

Oil for the sacrament of unction is a completely different oil from either holy chrism or the Oil of Gladness, and is blessed by the priest in the context of the unction service. This holy oil is primarily for healing, which can include physical and psychological healing, the proper bearing of sickness, and even for dying correctly. A general anointing or unction service, accompanied by seven epistle and gospel readings, has customarily been celebrated on the afternoon of Holy Wednesday in the Greek practice, although it has no specific connection with Holy Week. It can be celebrated whenever it is needed throughout the year, and is often done for individuals suffering from grave illness. Roman Catholics and some traditional Anglicans also refer to this rite as the Anointing of the Sick. One of the earliest written records of holy unction is recorded in the *Euchologion of Serapion of Thmuis*, a contemporary of St. Athanasius (ca. 293-373). This document, preserved at the Great Lavra on Mount Athos, forms the basis for the Alexandrian rite.

### *The Orthros Anointing After Lauds (Praises) with Holy Oil*

The Orthros/Matins anointing sometimes administered after Lauds (Praises) uses yet another type of “holy oil,” not to be confused with those above. This is usually taken from oil lamps over or near relics or holy icons, although there are differing practices. The holiness of the oil comes from its proximity to these items and is not to be confused with chrism, the Oil of Gladness, or with the oil for holy unction.<sup>27</sup>

## Appendix I

### The History and Use of Balsam

Balsam or the “Balm of Gilead,” also called the “Balsam of Mecca”, is one of the oldest and most traditional ingredients of chrism. It is a sweet-smelling resinous gum of the small tree *Commiphora gileadensis* (or *opobalsamum*), native to southern Arabia and cultivated in ancient and again in modern times, in ancient Judea, Palestine, and other parts of the Middle East.

<sup>27</sup> Zymaris interviews, *ibid*.

It has been used to make holy chrism by the Orthodox, and in the Roman Catholic and traditional Anglican and Lutheran churches for chrismation and reception of converts, the dedication of churches, icons, altar implements, and the coronation of Christian monarchs. It is also used by Roman Catholics and traditional Anglicans and Lutherans for priestly ordinations.

The word “balsam”, used in Greek and Latin texts, derives from the Hebrew *bosem*. At first *bosem* referred to any fragrant spice, and later was used exclusively for the powerful perfume from *Commiphora gileadensis*. In the Old Testament Song of Songs, *bosem* is sometimes translated as “perfume,” but in the Hebrew, the word refers to the balsam plant itself: “I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh along with my balsam.” (Song 5:1) In Septuagint Greek, *besom* is *retini*, meaning resin.

The Old Testament books of Genesis and Jeremiah mention balsam and its use as holy oil in anointing:

And they sat down to eat bread; and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites came from Gilead, with their camels bearing spicery and balm and ladanum, going to carry it down to Egypt. (Gen. 37:25)

Go up into Gilead, and take balm, O virgin daughter of Egypt; in vain dost thou use many medicines; there is no cure for thee. (Jer. 46:11)

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? (Jer.8:22)

In this last verse, “my people” and “the daughter of my people” refer to the Jewish people living in the land of Israel, although later Christian writers interpret the “balm in Gilead” and the “physician” as a prophetic allusion to Jesus Christ.

Most balsam was produced in Arabia and in the Holy Land around Jericho, particularly at the famous Hebrew town of Ein-Gedi, whose first balsam plants were believed to have been given to King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. Josephus records this tradition in his *Antiquities*, and in the volume *War*, in which he commends balsam as “the most expensive of local products.”<sup>28</sup>

Balsamic resin was valued in medicine and perfume throughout ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. The first-century Roman naturalist and historian Pliny the Elder mentions it in his *Naturalis Historia* as one of the in-

<sup>28</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* (VIII, vi, 6.) and *War* (4:469).

redients of the “Royal Perfume” of the Parthians. He writes that balsam was often worth more than its weight in gold, and that during the First Jewish-Roman war in 70 AD, the Jews attempted to destroy the balsam plantations in Jericho, rather than let them fall into Roman hands. “Battles raged over every bush,” and when the Romans won, Titus displayed balsam shrubs in his triumphal procession in Rome.<sup>29</sup>

The secrets of balsam production were heavily guarded by Jewish and later Muslim producers. Judging by the great efforts of the young Anglo-Saxon St. Willibald (nephew of St. Boniface and later missionary to Germany) to smuggle balsam through Phoenician Tyre on his way back to Europe, the export of balsam by foreigners was heavily taxed when not completely forbidden by rulers eager to maintain their monopoly. The following excerpt is from an account of the pilgrimage narrated by the saint before his repose in 787 to his kinswoman, the nun Huneberc of Heidenheim:

*Willibald Smuggles Balsam into Phoenician Tyre*

Willibald had formerly, when at Jerusalem, bought balsam and filled a gourd with it; and he took a gourd that was hollow, and had flax, and filled it with rock oil<sup>30</sup>; and poured some in the other gourd, and cut the small stalk, so that it fitted exactly and closed up the mouth of the gourd. So, when they came to Tyre, the citizens stopped them, and examined their burdens to see if they had anything concealed; for if they had found anything, they would immediately have put them to death. But they found nothing but Willibald’s gourd, which they opened, and, smelling the rock oil in the stalk, they did not discover the balsam that was within. So they let them go.<sup>31</sup>

Appendix II

Prayer for the Blessing of Holy Chrism  
from the *Great Euchologion*

O Lord of mercy and Father of lights, the giver of every good and perfect gift, grant to us, unworthy though we be, the grace to fulfill the ministry of this great and life-giving mystery, as you gave it to Moses your faithful stew-

29 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 12: 111–113.

30 Rock oil: (Petree oleum) Bitumen, a sticky, tar-like form of petroleum.

31 “The Travels of Willibald: AD 721-727, recorded from his own narration by a member of his family, Nun Huneberc of Heidenheim”, *Road to Emmaus Journal*, Issue No 41, Spring, 2010, Portland, OR



ard, and to Samuel your servant, and to your holy apostles, and send your Holy Spirit upon this chrism:

Make it a royal anointing, a spiritual anointing, a safeguard of life, a hallowing of souls and bodies, an oil of gladness, which was prefigured in the Law, and which shone forth in the New Covenant:

For by it were anointed priests and high priests, prophets and kings, and your holy apostles, and all who have been reborn through the washing of new birth, by them, and by the bishops and priests who have followed them, even to this day.

And so, Lord God Almighty, by the coming of your holy and adorable Spirit, make it a garment of immortality, a perfecting seal which imprints your divine Name, and that of your only-begotten Son, and that of your Holy Spirit, on those who have received your divine washing:

That they may be known before your face, that they may be of your household and of your city, your servants and handmaids; that they may be delivered from all evil and redeemed from all sin;

That they may be recognized by the angels and archangels and all the powers of heaven, as having put on the garment of your immaculate glory, and may strike fear into all evil and impure demonic powers;

That they may be a people set apart, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, signed through this immaculate mystery, so that you, O God and Father, may dwell in them through the Holy Spirit.

For you, our God, are holy, and you dwell in the holy places among those who are holy, and to you do we give glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now, and always, and for ever and ever. Amen.

To you, O God and King of all, do we bow the neck of our heart, giving thanks because you have judged us worthy to become the ministers of these your divine mysteries: we proclaim the mercy, which you have poured out upon us with such abundance: and we pray that we may receive your hallowing, like the chrism which is poured upon our heads, since the chrism which is poured out is the Name of your only-begotten Son, Christ our God, through whom the whole world, visible and invisible, is sweetly scented:

For you are everywhere to be adored and glorified, and to you do we give glory and worship, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now, and always, and forever and ever. Amen.<sup>32</sup> ✦

32 From *The Great Euchologion*, (Goar), rev. edition 1730, translated by W. Jardine Grisbrooke, in "Blessings of Oil and Anointings: The Byzantine Rite" in Rudley and Rowell, *The Oil of Gladness: Anointing in the Christian Tradition*, SPCK London, 1993, pg. 211–218.