

Holy Anointing Oil Tradition in Eastern Orthodox Church Perspective

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Abstract

The fact that there are many different types of holy anointing oil available for purchase suggests that there is a high demand for this traditional practice. To gain a better understanding of this tradition, it would be helpful to examine its ancient roots. This article focuses on the use, purpose, and meaning of holy anointing oil within the Eastern Orthodox Church. This church is one of the oldest religious institutions that practices this tradition. The research method employed in this study is qualitative and involves a thorough review of relevant literature. By the end of this investigation, the article aims to explore the biblical perspective on holy anointing oil and how the tradition is viewed within this context. The Epistle of James is one of the most frequently cited texts concerning the use of anointing oil. According to James, the central theme of the letter is the importance of combining faith with good deeds.

Keywords: Holy Anointing Oil, Eastern Orthodox Church, Bible, Tradition, Miracle

I. INTRODUCTION

Mystical phenomena are thick in the spiritual world. The church as an inseparable part of the spiritual world is certainly not free from these phenomena. Miracles as one of the mystical phenomena are most often the subject of discussion in the spiritual world. Even the slogan of one of the streams in Christianity that has been very popular in recent times is that miracles still exist. Miracles are considered a manifestation of God's presence or His power in this broken world that needs divine love.

In addition to the discussion of miracles, the discussion of anointing oil is also one of the highlights, apart from being related to miracles (both are manifestations of God's power), also because the availability in the online marketplace is very large (as an indicator of the number of interactions with anointing oil). This anointing oil has even become a commodity that is traded in a church. It is common to discuss this oil from the perspective of a charismatic church. However, it is very rare to discuss this oil from the perspective of the Orthodox Christian sect, which is one of the oldest sects in the world of Christianity. Therefore, it is interesting to see this church's view on the anointing oil tradition. After seeing this church's view, the research will compare the Orthodox's view with what the Bible says about the anointing oil.

II. METHODOLOGY

The method used in this research is descriptive with a qualitative approach. Data will be collected from library research. The aim of this study is to understand the deep-rooted anointing oil tradition from one of the most ancient churches and compared it to the concept from the Bible. In the end, the conclusion is built from those data.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The History of the Orthodox Church

When it comes to history, of course as followers of Christ, the Orthodox Church recognizes its history as the same as other churches, beginning with the Lord Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord Jesus spoke with Peter about the church that would be built on the rock. This is followed by the story of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8). The church fathers started new churches from Jerusalem to Antioch and continued to spread to Rome. The ministry pioneered by Christ's disciples was continued by the next generation. Indeed, in the beginning, persecution continued to occur for the early church. Even the disciples of the Lord Jesus were martyred because of the persecution that kept coming.

Successors of church leaders such as Cyprian and Ignatius died as martyrs for Christ just like the apostles who had preceded them. There was a concept of understanding at that time about three types of martyrs. They were white martyrdom, green martyrdom, and red martyrdom. This movement continued until Emperor Constantine took control of the Byzantium Empire.

3.2 Trusted Source of Orthodox Church

Speaking of the values held by the Orthodox Church, one cannot escape one of the most famous sayings in the Orthodox Church, the third being asked how it differs from other churches. The phrase reads: "We preserve the Doctrine of the Lord uncorrupted, and firmly adhere to the Faith He delivered to us, and keep it free from blemish and diminution, as a Royal Treasure, and a monument of great price, neither adding anything nor taking anything from it" (William 17). It is on this basis that the Orthodox Church based some of the sources they hold to this day. Even John of Damascus said "This idea of living continuity is summed up for the Orthodox in one word: Tradition. We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it" (McFarlane 2020). According to Timothy Ware, Orthodox Christians still adhere to certain traditions that have been sourced from several areas including the Bible, the Seven Ecumenical Councils, Later Councils, the Fathers, the Liturgy, Canon Law, and Icons.

3.3 Bible

The Orthodox Church holds the belief that the Christian Church is synonymous with the Church of the Holy Scriptures. Bishop Kalistos Ware, also known by his monastic name Kallistos Ware, is a prominent Orthodox Christian bishop, theologian, and writer. He was born in Bath, England in 1934. He was educated at the University of Oxford, where he later became a lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Studies, emphasizing that the Bible represents the ultimate manifestation of God's revelation to humanity, and Christians must consistently act as 'People of the Book'. However, since Christians are known as 'People of the Book', the Bible is deemed to be a book for the people, rather than an authority above the Church. It should instead be viewed

as a text that is experienced and comprehended within the Church, which is why the separation of Scripture and Tradition should be avoided (Kidus 2011). In addition, Theodore G. Stylianopoulos who was a prominent Orthodox Christian theologian and professor from Holy Cross Greek School of Theology says the concept that scripture, tradition, and Church are viewed as a comprehensive unity with interdependent parts means that they cannot be viewed separately but are interconnected and essential components of the Christian faith. This idea acknowledges that the Bible is not the only source of religious authority and that the interpretation and application of scripture are informed by tradition and the teachings of the Church. These three elements work together in harmony to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith and are viewed as equally important in guiding believers in their spiritual lives. The core of Scripture is the mysterious eternal Christ, concealed in the Old Testament and unveiled in the New Testament. The theological substance of Tradition is based on the gospel, which encompasses the saving message of Scripture. It is the good news of God's salvation through Christ and the Spirit, leading to the triumph over sin and death, and the beginning of a new creation, ultimately culminating in the glorification of the entire universe in the eschaton. The Church is not simply a historical artifact but is the living community of God's people, and is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is not just an appendage to history but a critical part of revelation. Therefore, the Church is the foundation from which scripture and tradition arise, and together they create a cohesive source of revelation, which is the ultimate standard for the life of the Church (Ed Cunningham and Theokritoff, 2008).

From the statement of Bishop Kalistos Ware and Stylianopoulos, it can be seen that Bible is really important and cannot be separated from the tradition. Moreover, the tradition comes from the book, as the Christian people regard as People of the Book. Therefore, the Bible becomes one of the sources of tradition that is held by the Orthodox Church.

3.4 The Seven Ecumenical Council: The Creed

Ware says in his book that the doctrinal definitions of an Ecumenical Council are infallible. The Orthodox Church regards the declarations of faith made by the seven councils, in addition to the Bible, as having a permanent and unchangeable authority (Ware 1997). It means that the creed is an official doctrinal statement that has to be believed and obeyed by the church members. One of the most important creeds is Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is read or sung at every Eucharistic celebration, as well as daily at the Midnight Office and Compline. There are other creeds such as Apostles Creed and also Athanasian Creed, though both creeds are not considered equals to Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Christianity was at another age when the Nicene creed was born. Christianity has just become the official religion and also gained political power. It means structure, culture and even tradition in a church changed. The Ecumenical Council was one of the solutions for many problems that the church had at that time. The Council formulated the creed, law, etc. The products of the Council had a very large impact at the time (Alfeyev, 2011). Because of the high impact result of the Council products, the church has a later council to resolve church issues.

3.5 Later Councils

The history of the Orthodox Church does not stop after the Ecumenical Council. There are some councils that followed the Ecumenical Council. Those following

councils have also become the trusted source of the Orthodox Church. Even more, after 787 A.D., Church has two major ways of showing their thought. The first way is by the local council, and the other way is using letters or statements of faith. These are the following Orthodox doctrinal statements:

1. The Encyclical Letter of St Photius (867).
2. The First Letter of Michael Cerularius to Peter of Antioch (1054).
3. The decisions of the Councils of Constantinople in 1341 and 1351 on the Hesychast Controversy.
4. The Encyclical Letter of St Mark of Ephesus (1440 – 1441).
5. The Confession of Faith by Gennadius, Patriarch of Constantinople (1455 – 1456)
6. The Replies of Jeremias II to the Lutherans (1573 – 1581).
7. The Confession of Faith by Metrophanes Kritopoulos (1625).
8. The Orthodox Confession by Peter of Moghila, in its revised form (ratified by the Council of Jassy, 1642).
9. The Confession of Dositheus (ratified by the Council of Jerusalem, 1672).
10. The Answers of the Orthodox Patriarchs to the Non-Jurors (1718, 1723).
11. The Reply of the Orthodox Patriarchs to Pope Pius IX (1848).
12. The Reply of the Synod of Constantinople to Pope Leo XIII (1895).
13. The Encyclical Letters by the Patriarchate of Constantinople on Christian unity and on the 'Ecumenical Movement' (1920, 1952).

Those Councils are believed to be the source of the Orthodox faith.

3.6 The Fathers

There are no exact rules about defining the father according to the Orthodox Church. No special classification for the level of importance of each father. Though some titles were given to several fathers, such as the three Great Hierarchs, consisting of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom. Even though some titles out in some fathers, it does not mean those fathers are more important or that an untitled father has less importance than the titled one. As long as they are fathers of the Church, they are equal in level of importance. The fathers have infallible authority though the fathers can have different thoughts from each other. The disagreements are about the richness and harmony of the unity of fatherhood.

The term "Church Father" is a historical and theological designation rather than a position or title within the Orthodox Church. The authority and recognition of the Church Fathers are based on their contributions to the theological and spiritual traditions of the Church, and their status as such is determined by the Church's historical and theological scholarship. Therefore, until now, the Orthodox still acknowledge nowadays Father. In essence, the statement implies that the absence of any new Church Fathers would indicate a lack of guidance or even the Holy Spirit is leaving Church (Ware 1997).

3.7 The Liturgy

The fifth source of Orthodox faith is the liturgy. There are some rituals, prayers, ceremonies, and blessings in the Orthodox Church. Indeed, it needs a rich liturgical source. Most of it is passed down from generation to generation. Though it does not have formal dogmatic like the Roman Catholic has, it is misleading to think that the Orthodox Church does not have a liturgy. According to Walker (2014), St. Basil the

Great has expressed that while some liturgies are passed down in writing, others are passed down as a mystery based on the beliefs of the Church.

Although there are some liturgies passed down through oral tradition, some others are written. Indeed, the translated liturgies bring variation to each language. The various language families within Orthodoxy display slight but significant differences in style and form, particularly with regard to liturgical customs that developed over the past thousand years. When translating Orthodox liturgical texts into English, they tend to follow one of three ritual forms most commonly used in the US: the Antiochene patriarchate, the Russian Church as adapted for the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), or the Greek Orthodox archdiocese which simply translates the ceremonies of the Great Church of Constantinople (McGuckin 2010).

3.8 Canon Law

Canon law pertains to various issues within the field, such as the origins of Canon law, church organization, the establishment of new Orthodox churches, the process of canonizing saints, the ecclesiastical calendar, regulation and enforcement of justice, ecclesiastical court, marriage guidelines, integration of converts from other beliefs, the church's relationship with secular authorities, alignment of church law with civil law, finances, and ownership. The scope of Canon law also encompasses the topics and methodologies of other theological disciplines such as critical analysis (church history), doctrinal instruction (dogmatics), Canons from the holy fathers (patristics), baptism, and admission into the church (liturgics) (McGuckin 2010).

In addition to theological doctrines, the Ecumenical Councils also formulated Canons that addressed matters of church governance and discipline. Local councils and individual bishops also created additional Canons. Several Byzantine writers, such as Theodore Balsamon and Zonaras, compiled collections of Canons, along with accompanying explanations and commentaries. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, a saint, produced a well-known modern Greek commentary called the Pedalion ('Rudder') in 1800.

Despite this, the Canon Law of the Orthodox Church is not well-understood in the Western world, and some Western writers may mistakenly believe that Orthodoxy lacks outward regulations. However, the life of Orthodoxy adheres to many strict and rigorous rules. Nonetheless, some Canons are difficult or impossible to apply in the present day and have fallen out of practice. If a new general council of the church is convened, revising and clarifying Canon Law may be one of its chief tasks.

While doctrinal definitions of the councils possess unalterable validity, Canons deal with the everyday life of the Church, which is constantly changing and encompasses a variety of individual situations. Nevertheless, there exists an essential connection between the Canons and the dogmas of the Church. Canon Law simply seeks to apply these dogmas to practical situations in the daily life of each Christian. Therefore, to a certain extent, the Canons are part of the Holy Tradition (Ware 1997).

3.9 Icons

The Church's Tradition is not only communicated through language and worship practices, but also through art, specifically the Holy Icons, which use lines and colors to reveal God to Orthodox Christians. Icon painters must conform to the rules of Tradition rather than expressing their personal aesthetic preferences. While artistic inspiration is allowed, it must follow specific guidelines. The sincerity of an icon painter's Christian faith is more important than their artistic skill, and they should

prepare themselves for their work through confession and receiving Holy Communion (Ware 1997).

Some people believe that the second law of the Ten Commandments prohibits the use of icons, but this cannot be true since it would ban all forms of artistic representation. In fact, in the book of Exodus, the Lord Himself instructed Moses to create two gold cherubim and place them on the ark of the covenant. Additionally, the Lord also commanded the images of cherubim to be woven into the curtains and veil of the Tabernacle. The problem with images is not the images themselves, but how they are used. The commandment in Exodus 20:4 does not prohibit all artistic representations, but rather it forbids the worship of images as gods and goddesses, such as “gods of silver, and gods of gold” (Ex 20:23). God knew that such images would lead the Hebrews away from worshipping Him, the only true God (Ex 20:3-5) (Nelson 2008).

3.10 Chrismation

There are two traditions that use the holy oil in the Orthodox Church. There are several ways to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church. The first is through the sacrament of Chrismation. The second usage is in the tradition of healing the sick. The first discussion in this study is on the sacrament of Chrismation.

Since ancient times, the Church has always performed chrismation right after baptism. During the sacrament of chrismation, the person who has just been baptized is anointed with oil by the bishop or priest in order to receive the Holy Spirit. The origins of this sacrament can be traced back to the Old and New Testaments, and are particularly emphasized on the Day of Pentecost. The word Chrismation derives from the Greek word that means anointing (Nelson 2008).

Chrismation, which is the second sacrament in the Orthodox Church, is a part of the initiation (baptismal) rites. During Chrismation, a person is anointed with myrrh oil that has been specially consecrated just like what Israelites had in Exodus chapter 30. The purpose of it is to receive the gift of the “Seal of the Holy Spirit.” In Orthodoxy, Chrismation typically follows immediately after water baptism, and is considered an integral part of the baptismal ritual that completes the process. It is also through Chrismation, the initiate is transformed to become more like Christ, who is also known as “the anointed one”. This sacrament also provides access to deification, which occurs through the transformative grace of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who illuminates and sanctifies (McGuckin 2010).

The Orthodox Church believes that in the early days of the church, there were two ways to bestow the Holy Spirit. The first way was by laying hands on someone, and the second way was by anointing someone with holy oil. This is mentioned in Acts 8:14-17. The tradition of anointing still exists today in the Orthodox Church and is the origin of Chrismation. The anointing can only be performed by the Senior Bishop of each region, using holy Myron (consisting of 20 ingredients, such as various oils, wine, fragrant herbs, and incense).

The Orthodox Church distinguishes between the grace conferred through Chrismation and that which is received through Baptism. In fact, Chrismation is based on the idea that it grants the believer the precious and majestic gift of the Holy Spirit. That it allows the initiate to move beyond the basic forgiveness and restoration that comes with baptism, and grants access to the mystery of deification. This mystery involves living in Christ through the Holy Spirit, which continues to develop from the time of initiation until reaching the ultimate goal of joining Christ’s heavenly community of saints. The procession is that after baptism, the newly initiated individual is clothed in white robes and stands barefoot in the church. Chrism, in the shape of a cross, is applied to various parts of the body associated with the senses,

including the forehead, eyes, nostrils, lips, ears, breast, hands (both front and back), and feet. At each anointing, the priest utters the words “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

3.11 Anointing of the Sick

Just like what is written in James, Orthodox Church holds the tradition of anointing oil to the sick. They believe that oil has been regarded as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, representing the mysterious and powerful energy of divine grace, and is often blessed or used in prayer as a way to sanctify or make holy. It roots from the Old Testament tradition that emphasizes the belief that a person is a unified whole and that physical illness, suffering, and death are not just physical problems, but also spiritual ones. According to Genesis, humans were created to live in harmony with God in paradise, where there was no sickness or death. However, the sin committed by Adam and Eve caused a separation from God, resulting in humanity’s vulnerability to sickness, suffering, and death. The devil was seen as the cause of this tragedy, and sin was believed to be the root cause of physical disorders. The Scriptures and patristic commentary affirm a close connection between sin and sickness. Healing narratives in the Scriptures are presented as a divine gift, a result of the power of God and the forgiveness of sin (McGuckin 2010).

In addition, the pieces of evidence of Jesus’ miraculous healing are an important aspect of His ministry. The miracles are also representations, specially through exorcism, of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. It upholds the idea that an individual is an integrated entity and that physical illness, suffering, and death are not solely physical concerns, but also spiritual in nature. Moreover, the Bible portrays Jesus as the ultimate healer who eradicates the forces of evil, such as sin and sickness, from the world, while the apostles’ ministry was also connected with the act of healing.

The use of anointing oil as a ritual for healing in the early church can be observed in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, which dates back to the early third century. This work outlines a process of consecrating oil during the Eucharistic liturgy, specifically for the benefit of the sick. The practice of blessing oil for healing is also mentioned in the Apostolic tradition, a text from the late fourth century, which shares similarities with the earlier description. Additionally, the Prayer Book of Serapion, compiled by an Egyptian bishop and follower of St. Athanasius in the fourth century, provides a specific example of the prayer recited during the blessing of the oil. Syrian theologian Aphrahat, also from the fourth century, offers a description of different sacramental uses of consecrated oil, including the anointing of the sick. In the fourteenth century, the sacrament of anointing the sick reached its definitive form, which is still evident in the Orthodox service books. The ideal number of seven priests is still considered appropriate to perform the sacrament, with each of them participating in specific prayers, readings from the gospel, and anointings. However, a smaller group of priests may also conduct the sacrament.

The anointing rite involves both physical and spiritual aspects, with the ultimate goal of restoring communion with God and obtaining forgiveness of sins for the sick person, thereby achieving spiritual healing. However, the physical aspect of healing is also important, as the human being is viewed as a psychosomatic unity. Therefore, the two aspects of healing are interconnected, with a greater emphasis on the spiritual aspect. The ritual acknowledges the Lord of Mercies who created the close unity between body and soul, and whose word can heal both sins and diseases.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Orthodox Church, which still strongly holds onto its traditions, considers anointing oil as a legacy that must be preserved, maintained, and believed to have benefits. The concept that illnesses come from sin is essentially true, in accordance with what is stated in the Bible. However, there are several things that need to be reconsidered.

Talking about the anointing oil as a mediator of God's power, it indeed can be used by God for healing. However, it should be added that God can also provide healing through other means, even without any media at all. By making a statement that oil is used as a mediator, and even having a ritual to achieve healing, it means exalting the ritual and not the Lord. Thus, it appears that God can only work through anointing oil. As a result, it may create the perception that medical science loses its value, and for youngsters who have a very present-oriented mindset, this could be a concept that they cannot come to terms with in their reality.

In conclusion, the application of anointing oil, when practiced in accordance with the teachings of the Orthodox Church, provides a loose interpretation of Biblical principles, as they are explicitly mentioned, without exploring their context further. Despite the Orthodox community referring to their oral traditions as context, a closer examination reveals that in the preceding chapters, Apostle James has stressed the importance of combining faith with good deeds, rather than focusing solely on rituals.

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