

## The Anointing of the Sick

Paul Meyendorff

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“The Anointing of the Sick” is the first book of “The Orthodox Liturgy Series” that has been published until now. It is written by Paul Meyendorff a leading Orthodox specialist in the history, theology and practice of the Orthodox liturgy. His main purpose of the book is to prove that healing is far too important to be left to the medical professions alone (p.12) and therefore, it is necessary and very important to revitalize the venerable ancient rite of the anointing of the sick that was expressed in James 5:14-15 *“Is any 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 man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”*

Meyendorff divided his book into an introduction, 4 chapters and two appendixes. He highlights in his introduction 4 points that led him to write this book:

1. “A vast, impersonal medical bureaucracy, controlled by doctors, governments, and insurance companies, has arisen, reaching deep into the life (and the pockets) of every individual” while modern medicine and technology have prolonged life almost indefinitely.
2. Doctors become very much like “high priests”. They are taking upon themselves alone the full responsibility to heal the sick neglecting the essential need for the sick’s homes, families, jobs, churches and society while treating them like mechanisms that have broken and in need of repair.
3. The relatives of the sick are satisfied by leaving their sick into the hands of the medical system alone. They consider that they have taken the right decision. They tend to forget that they have an important role in the healing of their sick. They try to hide away or run away from pain, suffering, death, and their own mortality. They are postponing facing the reality of their human nature.
4. The ignorance of the spiritual side of suffering. Spiritual suffering accompanies always the physical one. While lying alone sick in bed agonized by pain, facing mortality and losing control over the own body and life, we become tormented by another suffering, the spiritual suffering that doctors and the medical system cannot cure or offer any help.

Therefore, True Healing, for Meyendorff, “is both physical and spiritual, it can be given only by Christ,” ‘The Physician of our souls and bodies’ and the Church, as Christ’s presence in the world is charged to bring healing to her members and to those around her. This ministry is the primary task of her praxis and this work (book) looks briefly at the healing ministry of the church as it is expressed in the Scriptures, Tradition and the Liturgical life, focusing particularly on the sacrament of the anointing of the sick for “healing is far too important to be left to the medical professions alone.”

Hence, Meyendorff begins the first chapter with *The Healing Ministry of the Church*, The ministry that is initiated by ‘Jesus the Healer’, and continued through ‘the ministry of the Apostolic Church’. Then, he declares and explains that ‘Baptism is the Sacrament of healing’ and ‘the Eucharist is the Medicine of immortality’, and he ends his chapter by ‘life in Christ’.

In the second chapter, he gives a ‘*brief history of the rite of Anointing the sick*’ that goes back to ‘the Early Church’. He also describes the usages of this rite in the Byzantine Tradition, the contemporary rite and how this rite is celebrated in ‘the celebration of the rite’.

Meyendorff waited until the third chapter to theologize the rite speaking about ‘sickness and sin’, ‘the experience of sickness’ and ‘healing’.

In the last chapter that is titled ‘*What Can Be Done? Some Pastoral Suggestions*’ he asks for the restoration of the Ministry of Healing in the Parish that was, in his opinion, lost. He insists in the revitalization of the rite on Holy Wednesday and some comments on the celebration of the rite to Orthodox and Non-Orthodox and then he concludes with ‘Christ’s Ultimate Victory’.

At the end of the book, Meyendorff included the complete and the abbreviated rites of The Anointing the sick in the two appendixes to introduce the readers to the content of the prayers.

## CHAPTER I

### THE HEALING MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

Chapter 1 speaks about the ministry of the Church in which healing lies at its very center. Meyendorff highlights that the rite of healing of the ‘Anointing of the sick’ is but one aspect of the ministry of the Church because the sacraments of the Church, the gospels’ readings on Sundays and the liturgical prayers show us how frequently the theme of healing the soul and the body occurs.

He states that this healing ministry of the Church sprang out from Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the Messiah who from the beginning of His earthly ministry, revealed His identity as the Savior, whose prime mission is healing the sick, raising the dead and preaching the good news

to the poor as Isaiah had prophesized it in “35: 5-6” and which was mentioned in “Matthew 11:5”.

In fact, Christ’s ministry is to inaugurate the Kingdom, which means to reintegrate the sick person into the community of faith and restore his relationship and the world to God, which was disrupted by sin, the source of illness. This restoration requires the healing of the entire person, his soul and body, and Christ in some healings’ accounts, he granted forgiveness of sin prior to the physical healing and he commanded his disciples to carry out the same very task. He sent them out two by two and he gave them authority over the unclean spirits, to forgive sins and to heal the sick by anointing them with oil “Mark 6: 7-12; Matt 10: 1-15 and Luke 9: 1-6”.

Meyendorff draws also our attention to the fact that this mission is intended for the whole world; it healed both Pagans and Jews. It is performed out of Christ’s love and compassion and not as a show up business. It did not require the condition of faith since faith is presented in the Gospels as either preceding or following the miracle. And all those who were healed or were raised from the dead all got sick again and died.

In fact, the apostles carried out this ministry and were very joyful that they casted out demons in the name of the Lord during his earthly life and after Pentecost. Their emphasis was not on these miraculous cures, but rather on the life of the community, the Church, the body of Christ. Christians held everything in common; they sold their possessions and distributed them to all, as any has need. They stressed the unity of the Church. They collected money for each other and they fulfilled the Lord’s commandment to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and visit the sick and the prisoners. They lived as one body for any member who fell into sin, the whole community was charged with healing the wound, because the whole community was wounded. Their focus was, as the Lord’s, to heal the corrupted relationship between God and creation, which its locus is the Church’s sacraments and the proper way of living in Christ.

Meyendorff claims that the first sacrament that restores and regenerates a new relationship with God is Baptism in which the converts, children or adults, abandon their old life where sickness and death prevail and enter into life in Christ where they no longer dominate. This new relationship, which will endure for ever even after the physical death, allows the converts to become the children of God, heirs of the kingdom and members of Christ’s body who destroyed death by death. Sickness and death continue to exist, but they do not mark the end of existence, but a passage into the new life, the kingdom.

Therefore, Baptism is the sacrament of healing of the entire person par excellence. The prayers in the rite of Baptism reveal this healing process. It begins with the exorcism of the

catechumenate and continues with that of the oil and water used in the rite. The blessing prayers asks for the renewing of soul and body and petitions the Lord for deliverance from the workings of the devil, which certainly includes sickness and death and the Epistle's reading "Roman 6: 3-11" highlights the victory over death effected by baptism.

This leads the catechumenate to receive the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit through the anointing with chrism in which the destructive spirit in him is expelled and drowned in the waters of baptism. By such, he becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit and is incorporated into the body of Christ, the Church, which is the presence of Christ in the world who is charged to bring the same healing of Christ to the whole world. Through baptism the Fallen humanity is recreated for our sins are forgiven and the image of God in us is restored.

He continues saying that the prayers of the Eucharistic liturgy contain numerous references to healing of both body and soul as in the rite of baptism also. The litanies, the intercessions in the anaphoras prayers of both John Chrysostom and Basil the great and the prayers prior to the partaking of the Holy mysteries demonstrate this healing of soul and body. Every Sunday we are fed, restored and healed. We recover our true identity as bearers of the image and likeness of God and our citizenship in God's kingdom is affirmed, which is the true aim of all Christian healing.

Therefore, while baptism and chrismation are the means by which we become members of the Church, the sacrament of Eucharist, the Medicine of Immortality, is the ongoing means to receive the grace of the restoration of the proper relationship with God in which we become partakers of Christ who is present in the bread and wine that become his body and blood. Eucharist is therefore, the realization of the restoration of this communion. It is precisely that in the Eucharist, the basis of the orthodox teaching about divinization is embedded.

After the privileged role of the sacraments of Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist in the life of the Church, Meyendorff draws our attention to the rich liturgical tradition that is practiced throughout various sacraments as marriage, penance, ordination, as well as the daily, weekly and annual cycles of prayers, personal prayers, fasting and almsgiving, and the prayers of blessing of various objects. They all involve an element of healing.

He says that the liturgical tradition of the Church is an integral part of the Church's healing ministry. It expresses our continual life in Christ. It incorporates us into the salvation history. We no longer live as separate individuals, but as members of the body of Christ in which we can transcend the brokenness, the isolation, the sickness of this broken world.

In fact, these are understood from the prayers of the liturgical life of the Church. The prayers of the sacrament of marriage (the earthly union), for example, reveal the eternal union where

neither sickness nor death can break the bond which God has forged. Even the sacrament of ordination requests from God “to heal that which is infirm” and the main goal of the sacrament of penance, the continuation of the healing power of baptism, is the restoration of the sinner into the life of grace, into the Church and into communion.

Then Meyendorff reminds us that, in fact, we are called to pray unceasingly for our private prayers are an extension to the Church’s prayers. The private prayers are constant petitions for ourselves, our families, for our neighbors and for the world around us. We pray for their individual and collective healing and salvation. At the end, Christians are called to carry on the healing ministry by baptizing all nations, thus making healing available to all.

## CHAPTER II

### A Brief history of the Rite of Anointing the Sick

Meyendorff divides this history to 3 eras, the early church, the Byzantine Tradition and the contemporary rite. He remarks that there are few and rare references on how this ministry is carried out in the primitive Church. But the ministry of healing was essential to the newly born community and it was carried out with significance importance from the minute of when Jesus has sent his Apostles to heal the sick. It was ministered along with spreading the Gospel and caring for the neighbor. St James’ passage “Is any among you Sick?....” from chapter 5 verses13-16 shows this clearly.

He continues saying that the few evidences show that the anointing of the sick seems to have originated as a domestic rite and it was not a Christian invention. It was the custom of the Mediterranean world, which is rich with olive and it was used by pagans and Jews alike. It became Christian by its “integration with prayer and thanksgiving and [its] inclusion in the life of the church and of each of her member” like all other sacraments who take the elements of life as their starting point.

Most likely the prayers over the oil were performed at the Church by the bishop or presbyter and then the oil was taken home, kept in the “medicine cabinet” and used as needed. This domestic practice is carried out by the faithful until now. Meyendorff observes from the writings of Athanasius and John Chrysostom the emphasis on the role of the clergy to anoint and visit the sick is only deliberated in the 5<sup>th</sup> century when Cyril of Alexandria witnesses the twofold domestic and ecclesial aspects of the care of the sick and Isaac the bishop of Antioch in the mid-fifth century requires that the Orthodox bring their sick and infirm to the holy altar.

Some of these evidences show a link between healing and remission of sins as is stated by Origin in his second homily “*on Levictius*” and a text from the “*Demonstration*” of Aphraates, a

4<sup>th</sup> century Syrian saint' and, as well, as the prayers of Seraphion and John Chrysostom's homily on priesthood. Also the 6<sup>th</sup> century Caesarius of Arles links healing of the sick with Holy Communion and the earliest western text of the full rite, dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, similarly links the two together.

But the first written reference of the development of the rite dates back to the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century was found in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus # 5 when the oil of the sick was blessed immediately after the consecration of the bread and wine at the Eucharistic liturgy. The 4<sup>th</sup> century *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII shows another reference, which "instructs the deacon to let the bishop know if anyone is sick and to accompany him with his visits."

The 5<sup>th</sup> century brings only an expanded Syrian version of Hypolitus', but the best example of prayer over oil comes from a 4<sup>th</sup> century collection of prayers called the *Prayer Book of Serapion* whose author is an Egyptian bishop and a friend of Athanasius. "The prayers consist of 3 blessings of oil, one for oil and water offered by the faithful at the Eucharist, a second for baptismal chrism, and a third for the oil of healing." Meyendorff mentions that the first prayer shows that the oil was intended to be used at home by the faithful while the intention of the 3<sup>rd</sup> one, which is more expansive, was to be used for the rite of healing.

In the Byzantine Tradition, Meyendorff finds out that the *Codex Barberini 336*, the oldest extant euchologion (the priests' service book), is the earliest liturgical manuscript. It is dated to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century and contains three prayers for the sick and two for the consecration of the oil, but it provides no rubrics. Two out of the five prayers, the 1<sup>st</sup> for the sick and the 4<sup>th</sup> for the oil are used with some changes in today's rite. The prayers of the sick make no mention of anointing while, at the same period, a brief description of anointing by Theodulf, archbishop of Orléans from 798-818 mentions that the sign of the Cross with oil from a glass vessel was made on the different parts of the entire body of the sick person by three priest, but Theodulf does not indicate how the liturgical rite was unfolded.

Only the 11<sup>th</sup> century brings the fuller description of this ministry of Anointing in a manuscript called *Coislin 213*. This patriarchal eucholgy used personally by a presbyter assigned to Hagia Sophia. Rubrics show that 7 presbyters on 7 consecutive days perform the rite in a domestic church. It is interesting to know that the Eucharistic liturgy is performed right after the blessing of the oil, which is done by each of the 7 priests and thereafter, each presbyter in turn recites the prayer of anointing and anoints each one in the house and the doors, windows and the walls. The proskomide uses 7 prosphora and a lamp with the blessed oil is lit. Among the various prayers is Psalm 50 at the beginning and Psalm 33 at the conclusion, the daily prokeimenon, epistle and gospel, the communion verse, the gospel of the Good Samaritan, the great Ektene and the troparion to the unmercenary saints. Incensation, the distribution of the

antidoron and Dismissal were part of the order too. This rite finds its counterpart in the West in the 9<sup>th</sup> century Carolingian compilation. It is also seemed that a shorter version was celebrated in regular churches too, which contains only individual prayers and portions of it were commonly used.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century brings the climax of the development of the rite. It is called *Sinai gr. 973*, which calls to be celebrated by 7 presbyters on 7 consecutive days, but two only presbyters may perform the rite. This more complex rite instructs the sick to prepare themselves through confession and by washing themselves because they will not allowed to wash themselves for 7 consecutive days as the neophytes. It includes vespers, pannychis (short cathedral vigil) and Matins. The Eucharistic liturgy is celebrated by each presbyter in a different church each day. After the daily liturgy, all presbyters gather in one church and each in its turn lights a candle, recites one of the 7 prayers and consecrates the oil of the sick, which is a mixture of oil, wine and holy water previously blessed at Epiphany. Once again, the Eucharistic liturgy is celebrated in which the sick were laid down in the centre of the nave during the Great Entrance. Then the anointing follows by each presbyter while reciting one of the 7 anointing prayers and extinguishes his candle. This is done at the prayer before the ambo and then the Dismissal signals the escorting of the sick home where each home, the sickbed, the walls and the doors are anointed and the gospel account of Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10) is read while psalm 50 and the troparia were sung antiphonally. It is worthy to note that Psalm 50 accompanied all the prayers recited by the presbyters and the trisagion hymn and penitential troparia along 7 antiphons were sung during the consecration of the oil.

Anointing ceased to be celebrated in Eucharistic context in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and it has reached its present form a century later. The contemporary rite includes remnants of Pannychis and Matins, blessing of the oil, Anointing (repeated seven times as a unit), Absolution and Dismissal. The content of this rite is found in Appendix 1. Although the present form of the rite took 14 centuries to settle we find two that the practices of this rite vary from parish to parish and from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

There are two main contemporary practices, Greek and Slavic. The Greek practice, which mainly derived from *Coislin 213*, is solemnly celebrated on Holy Wednesday during the Holy Week in North America and it is very popular. It is celebrated as a preparation for paschal communion; it is understood as a “general service of blessing” or as a replacement for confession. This rite of healing was never a part of the regular cycles of worship and was celebrated whenever needed. Some Greek families request to be celebrated at their home. It is a natural development since catechumen was prepared during Great Lent with fasting, prayers and penitence to be baptized at Holy Pascha.

While the Slavic pattern in Russia was the same as in the Greek churches until the 17<sup>th</sup> century the celebration of the rite was changed due to two main reasons. The first is the requirement of 7 priests which led to celebrate the service in large monasteries and cathedrals, while the second reason came from the Latinizing theology of Metropolitan Peter of Moghila of Kiev (+1646). These two reasons resulted in less frequent celebration of the rite among the people and the second, which is more significant, is the reduction of the anointing of the sick to “extreme unction,” to be performed upon the approach of death. Peter did not go so far, but he prohibited the repetition of the anointing for the same illness.

And as such the celebrations became different from each other, but here, we see that some parishes from different jurisdictions come together several times of the year, or even monthly, for joint services. Meyendorff suggests that this is the appropriate time, and in the West, to come up with creative solutions and revitalize this important and essential aspect of the Church’s mission.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **Theology of the Rite of Anointing**

Meyendorff waited until this chapter to bring the good wine, the theology of the rite. He speaks about a) the link between sickness and sin; b) the experience of sickness and c) physical, spiritual and holistic Healing. He declares that the anointing rite has much to tell us about the Christian understanding of illness. The rite refers not only to physical and spiritual illness, but also to sin. The aim of the rite is not physical healing only, but spiritual healing as well and the return of the sick person to the community of God and the Church, which is the manifestation of the kingdom on earth. Its ultimate aim is to identify the suffering individual with Christ as king, priest and prophet. The future of the sufferer, whether he lives or dies, is assured, for in Christ there is no death.

The prayers of the rite make frequent connection between sickness and sin to the extent that we believe that there is a direct connection between personal sins and illness. This is true in some cases, as in the sexual transmitted diseases, lung cancer and heart ailment development because of excess of smoking and eating. However, in other cases there are no links at all.

Therefore, Meyendorff explains to his readers the Orthodox understanding and position on how sickness and death entered our world, which was created Good at the beginning by God, the Creator of all things out of nothingness. Meyendorff confirms that illness is not a punishment of the original sin, an inherited guilt, as in the Western approach, but it is as a kind of infection of disobedience and rebellion that has, through the original sin, spread to the world. Therefore, when we sin we contribute to a process that is already underway in each of

us. It is sin that broke the communion with God, the communion with the Good and since then everything had fallen apart.

However, Jesus Christ came and inaugurated a foretaste of the life of the coming Kingdom where there is neither sorrow, nor sickness or death, but life everlasting. This foretaste can be experienced in the Church where our sins can be cleansed and where we can become members of Christ's body and God's own people through the sacraments and different rites and prayers.

Meyendorff in his second title "Experience of Sickness" presents the striking terms of Leo Tolstoy's novel "*the Death of Ivan Ilich.*" He concludes from this account that illness leads to alienation from others and produces a shift in roles; the sick become dependent on the others and he is reduced by the society, who measures the human worth by his productivity, and the medical system to the status of a dependent child. He is no longer counted as a human being. However, denying him the spiritual healing can lead the sufferer to sin.

In his third one "Healing", Meyendorff, once again, goes back to the prayer texts, which show that we pray for physical and spiritual healing and for forgiveness, without which any physical healing is meaningless. For Meyendorff, True Healing, which he extracts from the prayers of the rite, is the reintegration of the sick into the fullness of life that is found in the restoration of full communion with God.

Meyendorff continues saying and reminding us of our sonship to God that obtained at the time of our baptism. As such, the absolution of sins generates a new birth, an enlightenment, liberation from slavery and adoption into sonship. So now, when the sick face the reality of his nature he prays to receive the prize of the high calling and to attain everlasting rest. Thus the healing implied by this rite is a cosmic event in which all things are set back into their proper perspective. Sin, sickness and death are made powerless through the operation of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In this perspective, the rite of Anointing accomplishes a holistic healing – whether the anointed recover or die – a) by the presence of the Church around the sick (no isolation) and by standing with them in their time of suffering, b) the rite reestablishes hope, for in Christ sickness and death are but a threshold to new life; they become the entrance into the life of the kingdom and suffering becomes like a *martyria* of the Christian faith in the way we deal with our suffering.

## CHAPTER IV

### WHAT CAN BE DONE? SOME PASTORAL SUGGESTIONS

From that preceded, Meyendorff suggests that a revival to the rite of the Anointing should be going underway with proper understanding of the rite. This ministry of healing should be reactivated by the whole Church, the totality of the community, clergy and laity alike, as it was described by James' letter chapter 5 and by Jesus' commandment to His disciples to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit the sick and etc.

Meyendorff reminds us also that the prayers of the Church envelop us from the day we are born until after our death. Every activity of our daily life has a prayer that petition God for physical and spiritual health. Hence he gives some recommendations to the Church, to the laity and to the clergy.

He highlights that the ministry of healing is given to the Church precisely because it is a Church. He explains that the word "elders" that was mentioned in James' passage does not mean priests in the modern sense of the word, but precisely the leaders, the representatives of the local, Eucharistic community of the church. They are the parish councils. And he continues clarifying his point by explaining the meaning of number seven (priests) that was chosen to perform this rite was to represent the fullness of the Church, for number seven is a symbol of completeness and fullness. Therefore, the lay members of the Church should engage themselves by visiting, be present and by bringing the sick to the services of the Church especially to the rite of the Anointing. In such, the faithful will see the face of Christ in the others (sick).

On the other hand, pastors must do their best to engage all the laity in visiting the sick and shut-ins. They should mention the names of the sick whenever possible during the various services. They should encourage the young persons in holding liturgies in nursing homes and develop care and share societies. Finally, pastors ought to bring back into practice the service of anointing of the sick as a properly liturgical celebration in the Church and ask the laity to bring their sick into this celebration of hope, and also in the places wherever the sick may gather to break the sick isolation. As such, the Church was given the opportunity to become witness of the victory of the Cross over suffering.

However, Meyendorff brings important concerns about the contemporary celebration of the rite on Holy Wednesday as in the Greek and Antiochian Churches. He says that the contemporary time of this celebration came to exist out of popular piety, but it interrupts the liturgical flow of the Holy Week by drawing the attention of the faithful away from the events surrounding the passion of Christ. The Anointing service is replacing the matins of Holy Thursday, which contains a rich hymnography and is leaving an important gap in Holy Week.

The other concern is that this service became a substitute for the sacrament of confession and it is no longer understood to be a rite for the physical and spiritual healing of gravely ill persons. This has allowed the faithful to avoid the rite of confession altogether and has diluted the original focus and purpose of the rite. Therefore, Meyendorff suggests that this service should be moved from its present place during Holy Week to the sixth week of Great Lent and to be celebrated whenever possible over those parishioners who do face serious illness, and who therefore benefit from it the most.

Then, Meyendorff addresses that confession and anointing do not substitute each other. Each practice has its own reality. The sacrament of Confession addresses the reality that we all sin after Baptism and provides a mean of reconciliation while the anointing of the sick addresses forgiveness of sins, focuses also on the reality of physical and mental suffering and provides the means of hope and healing.

Finally, Meyendorff reminds the Church that the Ministry of healing is intended for the entire world that was inaugurated by God and whose Son came to save. The laity (people of God) has to reach out to their neighbors and extends God's love towards them. They may take some oil from the lamp of a saint and anoint the un-Orthodox sick showing them support and love. As such, the Orthodox Christians are exercising their priestly ministry and bringing Christ to the world. In such ministry, the Church is providing and fulfilling an effective means of spreading the Gospel, the Good News about the kingdom where sickness and death have no power anymore and where the victory of Christ is revealed.

*Summarized by Fr. Jean El-Murr<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> As a work requested by the Faculty of Theology at Sherbrooke University as part of his doctorate research.