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Theological Premises and Practical Connotations regarding the Sacrament of the Anointing. Recourse to a Sacramental Theology of Ecclesial-Christian Life

Abstract

The present study aims to develop the theological premises and principles of the Holy Sacrament of Anointing and its organic link with the practical and external manifestation of this Sacrament of the Church. We underlined the dogmatic implications in the Sacrament of Anointing focusing on the Christological, anthropological, and ecclesiological teaching of the Orthodox Faith.



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The doctrinal sacramental thinking is underdeveloped in the Orthodox theology. For instance, there are relatively few theological writings about the Holy Sacrament of Anointing. This might be explained by the fact that Holy Sacraments relate more to experience than to *theologizing*. In fact, the whole Orthodox Faith understood in a doxological way is based more on its practice and experiencing, than on its discursive explanation.¹ However, there are times in the Church when the recourse to theology as an exposition of faith is imperative. These moments are required when there is a significant departure from the revealed Truth and from an authentic experience of this Truth which has been defined throughout the history of the Church.

During the last decades, at least in the context of the Romanian Church, we have noticed a mutation in the theological and practical meaning of the Holy Sacrament of Anointing², which is

¹ It is known that the Church did not create theology for the sake of theology but developed and presented certain realities of the Faith in accordance with the internal needs of its members. Christological theology, for example, was developed in the context of the errors concerning the Person of Christ the Savior in the fourth century; triadology and theology of icons also in such a historical context of wandering and moving away from the right Faith. And examples in this regard can continue.

² The Holy Sacrament of the Anointing has its origins in a very old tradition of the Church. Although we have no historical evidence, we can believe that it has been practiced since the apostolic period. It is mentioned, however, starting with the third and fourth century. Origen (PG 12, 418), Eusebius of Caesarea (PG 24, 268) and St. John Chrysostom (PG 48, 644), all of them mention it in reference to the text in the Epis-

often reduced to a simplistic and ritualistic act with immediate effects³. Therefore, in this paper we propose a theological foundation of the Sacrament of Anointment together with its practical purpose.

Holy Sacraments are not magical liturgical acts. They represent the supreme way of uniting man with his Creator, as well as the means of healing of human nature from evil, disease and death. This is because one cannot understand the union of man with his Creator while he is himself in a state of decadence, specifically, in the fallen state. Man is not able to enter into a personal communion with God after his fall because of his spiritual and structural corruption. However, the Holy Sacraments are not solitary acts or moments in the process of salvation and sanctification of man, they represent, together with the Sacrament of the Church, the supreme expression of the *oikonomic* work of the Savior Jesus Christ. Therefore, in order to understand the theological meaning of the Holy Sacraments in general, and of the Holy Anointing in particular, we need to turn our attention to three theological realities that determine it directly. In this way, we will be able to understand the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing through the analysis of three great Sacraments of existence: Man, Jesus Christ and the Church.⁴

tle of St. James: *“Is anyone sick between you? To call the priests of the Church and to pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him”* (Jas 5: 14-15). Until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the service of the Holy Anointing underwent transformations and adaptations, ending in the form we have today.

³ See more about the misunderstanding of the Holy Anointing as a mystical act with magical effects at I. Φουντούλης, *Τελετουργικά θέματα*, (Αθήνα, 2002), p. 334.

⁴ For an ecclesiological and christological dimension of the Orthodox sacramental theology see D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*,

Man is a mystery that announces through his life the supreme meaning of existence: the union between created and uncreated⁵. He is a being shaped in the image of God carrying in himself both the created and the uncreated, the breath of life of God. The human being was entrusted by the Creator with all the premises necessary to lead him to the fulfillment of his vocation and mission - *the likeness of grace*. In this context, given the freedom of man as a person, the moment of the fall of Adam has an impact and changes the mode of fulfillment of the meaning and the purpose of the creation of man. The fallen man knows good and evil, that is, the being and the non-being from which he was created. This knowledge, which becomes for him a way of being, is leading him to evil, and finally to become a slave of evil. Evil becomes in this situation a parasite sticking to human nature and manifesting itself first as death of the soul by breaking with the Source of Life-God, and second as a biological corruption, and finally to bodily death.

Therefore, human nature, besides the existential gifts with which it was endowed by creation, is also influenced by the stigmas of the fall. In other words, man in the post-paradisiacal state knows corruption, disease (mental and physical) and finally, death. These realities follow him from the moment of his fall until the consummation of history in the eschatological act, thanks to the *oikonomic* work of Jesus Christ.⁶

These are the anthropological premises of the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing. The correct understanding of this Sacrament

București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997) pp. 6-7.

⁵ St. Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1308 B.

⁶ The fallen status of man will be overcoming spiritually through the Holy Sacraments and bodily through death.

of the Church is related to the vocation of man, as well as at the consequences of fall suffered by human nature. Without the understandings of these realities, the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing might be misinterpreted and depart from a theological Orthodox perspective.

The Holy Sacrament of the Anointing is performed on a human subject that is created at the image of God being destined to deification, a person that suffers spiritually and physically a separation from God. That is why the Holy Anointing operates on human nature because there is a possibility of change. To restore man and restore his quality as the image of God, the Son of God comes in history and in time. Indeed, He is the incarnated divine Logos, Who is the divine-human personal foundation of the Holy Sacraments of the Church and of the Holy Anointing. Jesus Christ, Son of Man and God, the second great Mystery of created existence, fully restores and heals the human nature from all its sufferings and imperfections. This is the implicit mission of Christ's *oikonomic* work. The essential reason of the incarnation of the Son of God was the fulfillment of man's vocation, the union of the created with the uncreated. Only in this way can the creation justify its meaning, and only in this way can fulfill its finality. Thus, we identify in the work of the Savior Christ two main moments: restoration and union. These theological aspects are keys in order to understand the Holy Sacraments in general and the Holy Anointing in particular, aspects that we will develop hereafter.

Jesus Christ as Man, on the one hand, through His earthly life works to overcome the fallen human nature (through fasting, suffering, crucifixion and descent into hell), and on the other hand, he raises human nature (through Resurrection and Ascension) at the highest spiritual state. These two moments of the *oikonomic* activity of Christ fulfilled in the unique Person of Christ become essential moments and principles for the last

great Sacrament of the created existence - the Church. The work of Son of God - Jesus Christ - did not force man through His activity to unify with God, nor did He restored him by abolishing the primordial principle of creation, the freedom. At the contrary Christ has transferred all that He had accomplished and obtained through sacrifice into His body into the mystery of the Church. Therefore, through the Church and in the Church begins the restoration and the personal union of man with God. Thus, the Church is understood in Christ as His divine-human reality prolonged in the Holy Sacraments⁷.

The Church is not only a static reality, but a dynamic as well, carrying the mandate received by man at creation which is the sanctification and the deification. In this sense, Christ Himself institutes and activates through the Holy Spirit descended into the world at the Pentecost, the Holy Sacraments of the Church (Baptism, Anointing, Eucharist, Confession/Repentance, Anointing, Marriage and Ordination). They are direct consequences of the salvific and sanctifying activity of Christ. For this reason, the Holy Sacraments, whether they are expressly instituted by visible deeds, or by word or invisibly by and in His body and work, constitute the insoluble foundations of man's sanctification. All these Holy Sacraments, whether they have a general character (Baptism, Anointing, Eucharist), or a special one (Ordination, Marriage) aim at the overcoming by man of his fallen nature and the union by the man, through Christ, with the Holy Trinity. The Holy Sacraments therefore have a therapeutic function (spiritual-somatic) and one which is par excellence, unifying⁸.

⁷ D. Stăniloae, *Ființa tainelor în cele trei confesiuni*, in *Ortodoxia*, nr. 1/1 (1956), p. 7.

⁸ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 14.

Starting from these Christological and anthropological realities, we will now highlight some aspects regarding the theology and the sacramental meaning of the Holy Anointing.

The Holy Anointing is essentially determined, as we have pointed out, by the Jesus Christ's work regarding man's salvation. The healing power of this mystery resides in the fact that Christ is the One Who first healed in His Body the sickness and suffering of human nature⁹. Jesus Christ is the First of the humankind Who lives in His human being the Sacrament of the Holy Anointing. The corrupt and suffering human nature is anointed by the grace of the Holy Spirit by His divine nature.

This act which is performed on the basis of His common Hypostasis (of the divine and human nature) has as absolute finality not only the healing of His human body and nature, but also the raising of men to the fullest extent possible in communion with His the divine nature. The absolute finality of the healing act in Christ is the act of the Transfiguration, that is, the transformation of the body and the whole human being in the image of His uncreated energies. On these considerations we can argue that the Holy Anointing has its foundation in the very Person of the Savior Christ and that its supreme purpose is to raise the human body and the whole human being to the height of His divine nature.

As Christ through the Holy Spirit and through His deified body remains present in history and humanity in the Sacraments of the Church, we can understand why the Holy Anointing has also a profound ecclesiological character. It is no coincidence that seven priests are needed to perform it, or three whenever nec-

⁹ The healing power of the Holy Anointing is a continuation of the therapeutic power of Christ shared with men since His earthly life. cf. N. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, (Θεσσαλονίκη: Πουρναρά, τομ. Β, 2003), p. 495.

essary. It is a central aspect that draws our attention to the fact that the Sacrament of the Holy Anointing requires for its completion the entire ecclesiastical *pleroma*¹⁰. In fact, it is necessary that the Holy Anointing to be celebrated in the prolongation of the Divine Liturgy¹¹ with the active participation of all members of the local community¹². This is required by an essential principle in living the faith - compassion. The suffering of one of the members of the Church is shared and accompanied by the whole Church council, clergy and people: "*When a member suffers, the whole body suffers ...*" (I Corinthians 12:26). Therefore, the theological key and premise of the Divine Liturgy is the Church.¹³ The cases when the Holy Anointing is performed at home, at the sick person's house, are in fact extensions of the participation and prayer of the whole Church community. This is done as a result of everyone's participation in the Divine Liturgy which has been performed in advance for the sick person. This principle guarantees and saves the authentic understanding of Church's life as a whole. However, it is also preventing

¹⁰ I. Φουντούλης, *Τελετουργικά θέματα*, p. 331.

¹¹ In this sense, the practice regarding the Holy Anointing from the 10th-11th century is mentioned in *cod. Sinai 973*, which shows that after the service of this Holy Sacrament was supposed to celebrate the Holy Liturgy being celebrated for seven days by one of the seven priests who participated in the Sacrament of the Anointing. On the other hand, just as eloquent in the sense of the above is the practice according to which the seven priests, who would have participated in the Holy Anointing, should have all previously served the Holy Liturgy in seven different churches. The message of such practices is clearly ecclesiological one. I. Φουντούλης, *Κείμενα Λειτουργικής*, (Θεσσαλονίκη:Τεύχος Β,) p. 190.

¹² In ancient times, the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing was celebrated during the Holy Liturgy. *Κείμενα Λειτουργικής, Ακολουθία του Ευχελαίου*, (Θεσσαλονίκη:1978), p. 86-87// See: I. Φουντούλης, *Κείμενα Λειτουργικής*, p.184.

¹³ Cf. P. Evdokimov, *Orthodoxia*, (București:Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996), p. 324.

us from wrongfully approaching the Holy Sacraments and the Holy Anointing. More specifically, in regard to misconceptions of Holy Anointing as being - potentially- performed in almost any circumstance and at the request of a member of the Church regardless whether or not his problems are part of such a spiritual treatment. This is the case when the Holy Anointing is separated from its ecclesiological meaning given by the Divine Liturgy and especially by the Holy Eucharist. When is separated, the Holy Anointing is reduced, most of the time, at the level of an isolated practice and, in the most unfortunate cases, at the level of an obscure activity with multiple occult connotations.

The ecclesiological principle of the Sacrament of the Holy Anointing is a *sine qua non* condition which determines the whole work of the Church - as a therapeutic-expiatory and unifying reality. The Holy Anointing has a therapeutic purpose not in itself, but in the perspective of a close relationship with God and with others. For this reason, the whole Church or the church *pleroma* must participate in the suffering of one of the members.

According to this compassion, as an act of Christian love, the suffering can be healed and the congregation participates at the joy of his active return in the community and communion of the Church. We notice, in this sense, the fact that the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing and the life of the Church in general have a profound hypostatic/personal character. Human persons are dependent on each other and all are *dependent* on the relationship with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Only through the active personal participation in the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing and in all the other Holy Sacraments, the members of the Church can overcome the state of their fallen nature determined especially by selfishness. In this way, they contribute concretely at the physical and spiritual healing of a confrere. Moreover, the members of a congregation will be united with

each other and with God according to the principle of divine love revealed to us through the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Considering all the above, we cannot see the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing as a liturgical and sacramental center of the Church's life, nor can we accept its understanding as a simple liturgical act that gives the desirous, indefinitely, bodily health and relief from daily problems.

The therapeutic objective is an implicit one¹⁴, the main reason of the Holy Sacraments of the Anointing is, as we also find out from its text, the physical and spiritual restoration of the human person in order to make him again an active member of the Church: "... raise him from the bed of pain and from the bed of torment. Give him healthy and whole to Your Church, that He may be pleasing to You and do Your will"¹⁵. In other words, the main purpose of the Holy Anointing is the relationship with God by fulfilling His will, the healing, in this case, is only a consequence.¹⁶ When the emphasis is placed mainly on the therapeutic part of the Holy Anointing and not on the spiritual one, it

¹⁴ Although Father Dumitru Stăniloae calls the Holy Anointing "*Mystery of the body or for the healing of the body*" (D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 137), a work of the Church committed only from an immanent perspective (bodily health), without a certain spiritual transcendence necessary for any liturgical or sacramental act, cannot be accepted.

¹⁵ *Molitfelnic*, (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1984), p. 138.

¹⁶ The theologian Giani Colombo also entrusts us with this fact, stating that through the Sacrament of the Anointing the Christian receives grace to overcome the difficulties brought by illness and power to advance together with Christ on the path of salvation that takes place within the Church. As we can understand, this Italian theologian considers that the Holy Anointing cannot guarantee healing from certain sufferings, the main plan being that of the salvation in relationship with Christ. Giani Colombo, *Onction des Malades*, in *Dictionnaire Encyclopedique de la Liturgie*, (Turnhout – Belgium: Brepolis, vol. II), p. 115.

changes the whole meaning of this Holy Sacrament. In this way, the Holy Anointing is reduced to the immediate plan of a bodily restoration; the Church life seems to be of less importance. This is the reason why there are many Christians who participate more in the Holy Anointing and make more prayers related to the anointing than they do for the Holy Liturgy and in the Holy Eucharist. As a result, the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing becomes an isolated liturgical act, which is, theologically, impossible. Consequently, it is necessary to ask if we still can talk about the Holy Sacrament of Anointing in the absence of its Orthodox ecclesiology.

The ecclesiological principle of the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing determines another important theological principle, that of the sacramental inclusive participation in the life of the Church, with all that this principle implies. In other words, it is not possible to understand and correctly live the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing without an organic connection with the Holy Sacrament of Confession or Repentance¹⁷ and with that of the Holy Eucharist. The Holy Anointing offers to the faithful, in the sacramental perspective, a stable and holistic spiritual relationship with God, the healing from bodily suffering and the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins, however, is not attributed by a unilateral act, this act implies the believer's participation. The Holy Anointing essentially presupposes repentance (μετάνοια), that is, the change of mind and life¹⁸. As a rule, we

¹⁷ Father D. Stăniloae also talks about a certain connection between the Holy Anointing and the Holy Confession D. Stăniloae, *Teologia...op. cit.*, 138// See also B. Dufour, *Le sacrement de penitence et le sacrement de l' onction des malades*, in *Le nouveau droit ecclésial. Commentaire du code de droit canonique*, Paris: Tardy, 1989).

¹⁸ Following St. John Chrysostom and Origen, the Greek theologian H. Andrusos supports repentance as a premise for anointing and participation in the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing. Cf. X. Ανδροῦτσος,

can say that there is causal link between illness, suffering and sin, as sin brings spiritual sickness to the soul and then, it is causing suffering and bodily sickness. There are few exceptions to this rule, mainly when bodily diseases are the effects of divine pedagogical ordinances. Therefore, the Holy Anointing can only be understood in immediate connection with the Holy Sacrament of Repentance. Without this practical and sacramental unity, the Christian loses sight of both the meaning and the explanation of illness and suffering, and, consequently, of the meaning of his psycho-somatic recovery. The Christian is called to participate in the Holy Anointing by changing his own life significantly.

Another essential condition towards a full participation in the Sacrament of the Holy Anointing is its obligatory corroboration with the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. As mentioned above (the organic link of the Holy Anointing with the Holy Repentance), there is an essential internal relationship between the two Sacraments, a connection explained by the fact that both aim at the healing or at the spiritual and bodily restoration and union with God. Therefore, if the healing of suffering is related to the cleansing of sins in the Sacrament of Confession, the main purpose of the Holy Anointing which is that of restoring union with God, is achieved by participating in the Holy Eucharist. In fact, the spiritual culmination of the whole ecclesial life is represented by the Holy Eucharist. The obligation to participate both in the Holy Sacrament of Confession and in the Sacrament of the Eucharist protects us from misunderstanding and mispracticing the Holy Anointing.

The Holy Eucharist represents the immediate continuity of the Holy Anointing, since every disease requires passing through certain stages in the therapeutic methodology. First, we identify the disease through the Sacrament of Confession; then, we recognize it and repent for the state we have reached through the arbitrary use of our freedom. Once all this has been accomplished, we accept the therapy validated by the spiritual authority of the Church (canons, prayers, participation in the Sacraments of the Church) and we heal as much as possible the wounds of our soul and body. In the end, we move on to the last stage that gives us the possibility of full recovery, which is the blood transfusion (refreshed and healthy) which is accomplished, in our case, by the communion with the Holy Body and Blood of Christ. Therefore, the spiritual patient cannot depart from this strict order and spiritual health assistance of the Church. He cannot accept therapy alone without an identification of the spiritual problem and without a concrete finality of the therapy.

We highlight the fact that the meaning of the Holy Anointing is beyond the healing of diseases and sufferings, the real finality is the encounter and union with Christ¹⁹. This fact is based on the *oikonomic* act of salvation and sanctification of the world and humankind performed by Jesus Christ. Through this act of salvation He first restores the fallen human nature and then fully unites it with His divine nature in the bosom of the Holy Trinity through Resurrection and Ascension.

Conclusions

In this paper we propose an Orthodox approach of the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing understood from an overall theo-

¹⁹ G. Colombo, *Onction des Malades*, p. 115.

logical perspective that focuses especially on anthropology, Christology and ecclesiology. It is explained in the perspective of the anthropological dimension of the human nature corrupted by the fall of Adam, the Christological one based on the restorative act of Christ through/in His *oikonomic* work, and knowing the ecclesiological dimension of human salvation. The human nature is healed in the Church through the Holy Sacraments in direct relationship with Jesus Christ, the One Who first restored and healed His human nature in the unique Person of the incarnate Logos. Therefore, the Holy Anointing cannot be understood theologically without these theological and sacramental premises.

On the other hand, the prerogative and the theological foundation of the Holy Sacrament of the Anointing force us to practice it and live it in a certain way. It is necessary, as I have pointed out, to link it to the Holy Sacrament of Confession and to the Holy Eucharist. Since the purpose of the incarnation of the Son of God is our restoration and union with Him, the general purpose of the Church and implicitly of the Holy Sacraments of the Anointing is our restoration and sanctification in a fullest relationship with Christ and the whole Holy Trinity.