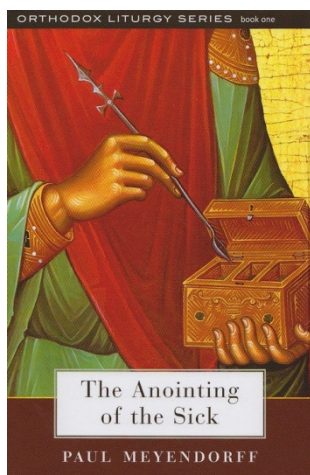


P. Meyendorff



The Anointing of the Sick

(Orthodox Liturgy Series 1)
 Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2009,
 186pp.

Reviewed by Job Getcha

The first book published in the new series of St. Vladimir's Seminary Press publications on the Orthodox Liturgy is dedicated to the rite of "Euchelaion", the Anointing of the sick, which came to be considered as the seventh sacrament in both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian tradition. Besides its scholarly character, this brief and interesting study by Prof. Paul Meyendorff is written in a very accessible style for a larger public with great pastoral concern, stressing to contemporary man that "Healing is too important to be left solely to the medical profession" (p. 9).

The first chapter (p. 13-30) deals in general with "The Healing Ministry of the Church". The author writes about "Jesus the Healer", the healing ministry in the Apostolic Church, baptism as sacrament of healing, the Eucharist as medicine of immortality and life, and "Life in Christ".

THE AUTHOR



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The second chapter (p. 31-61), which is definitely the most scholarly and perhaps the most interesting part of the book, gives a brief history of the rite of anointing of the sick. Beginning with the Early Church, the author mentions the testimonies of the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus (3rd c.), the *Testament of our Lord* (5th c.) and the *Euchologion of Serapion* (4th c.) as well as some patristic sources (John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Isaac of Antioch, Origen).

Then, the author deals with the history of the Byzantine tradition, reminding the reader that the earliest manuscript of the Byzantine Euchologion (*Barbirini 336*), from the 8th c., contains only five prayers (the first three being prayers for the sick, and the last two for the blessing of the oil), and no rubrics (p. 41). He also mentions a testimony of Theodulf of Orleans (8-9th c.) who says that the rite of the unction of the sick is performed by three priests in the Greek tradition (p. 43). The next testimony is given by an 11th c. manuscript (*Paris Coislin 213*) where we find the rite of anointing of the sick is performed by seven priests on seven consecutive days during the Divine Liturgy. The rubrics indicate that this rite is celebrated in a domestic church (p. 43-45). The oil is blessed by each priest at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, and the anointing takes place at the conclusion, after the prayer before the ambo.

During Great Lent, the Divine Liturgy is replaced by the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts. A similar rite is described by a 12th c. manuscript (*Sinai gr. 973*) where we have a celebration by seven (or three or two) priests during seven consecutive days (p. 46-51). All seven celebrate vespers, pannychnis with a special canon and matins with a special canon. The oil is blessed by each priest in turn, each one lighting a different lamp. Then, each day, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated by each priest in a different church. The anointing follows the prayer before the ambo, with a specific prayer read by each of the seven priests.

The author considers that "*Sinai 973* marks the climax of the development of the rite" (p. 51). In the 13th c., the rite was abbreviated and simplified and ceased to be celebrated in a Eucharistic context. In the 14th c. the present form of the rite appears – analysed by the author on p. 51-55 – where the seven readings of the Epistle and of the Gospel remind us of the former Divine Liturgies served over seven days. The author discusses then the practice of celebrating the rite of anointing of the sick for all the members of the Church as prescribed by *Coislin 213* on the first Saturday of Great Lent and on Lazarus Saturday, or on Holy Thursday or Holy Saturday as mentioned in some 17th c. sources. Today, this is done on Holy Wednesday afternoon or evening (p. 57), although this rite is not prescribed by the contemporary printed Typika.

The author is critical of the rite's transformation into an "extreme unction" during the time of Metropolitan Peter Moghila (17th c.) under Latin scholastic influence (p. 60).

The third chapter (p. 63-89) deals with the theology of the rite of anointing, looking at sickness and sin, the experience of sickness, and at physical, spiritual and holistic healing.

The fourth and last chapter (p. 91-112) shares some pastoral suggestions. The author advocates for restoring the ministry of healing in contemporary parishes with some original and challenging ideas. For instance, he considers that "the requirement that there be seven priests is precisely that the fullness of the Church should be present to minister the sick, for the number seven is a symbol of fullness and completeness", and therefore, according to him, "transposing this model to the present day, it is evident that the responsibility for ministering to the sick falls not just on the parish priest, but on the lay members of the parish as well, particularly those who hold responsible positions" (p. 94).

The author also speaks in favour of bringing back the rite of anointing of the sick in a "properly liturgical celebration, normally performed in a church, and with as many faithful in attendance as possible", over several ill people at a time who would be brought to the church for that purpose (p. 96), and in the context of the Divine Liturgy (p. 104). He discusses also our contemporary problem, when there are no more domestic chapels and when sick people are not kept at home but instead sent into hospitals, nursing homes or long-term care (p. 97). He also criticises a contemporary practice according to which the rite of anointing replaces in some places the normal matins service of Great Thursday (p. 99).

The book contains two useful annexes: an English translation by the author of the full rite of anointing the sick, served by seven priests, with seven prayers, seven Epistle and Gospel readings and seven anointings (p. 113-173), and an English translation by the author of an abbreviated anointing rite, according to a 14-15th c. Slavonic manuscript (*Moscow Theological Academy 85*), with one Epistle and Gospel reading, one prayer, and one anointing (p. 175-184).

This publication meant to reach a large public will be definitely very useful not only for Orthodox priests but lay people as well, helping them to rediscover in today's liturgical practice the spiritual richness and depth as well as the historical development of such an ancient sacramental rite. Otherwise, interested scholars should still consult G. Filias' study (*Les prières pour les malades et sur l'huile de l'onction dans l'Euchologe Barberini Grec 336*, Athènes, 1997), somehow not mentioned in the rather short bibliography of P. Meyendorff's book (p. 185-186).