

What is the theological basis for the Holy Oils and their uses in the Catholic Church?

In the Catholic Church, we have three kinds of holy oil:

1. The Oil of Catechumens,
2. The Oil of the Sick, and
3. The Sacred Chrism.

These oils are blessed/consecrated by the bishop once a year at the Chrism Mass. The oil of catechumens and sacred chrism (chrismation) are used during baptismal anointing while sacred chrism alone is used to anoint a person being confirmed or being ordained priest or bishop. The holy chrism is ordinary olive oil mixed with fragrances and transformed by consecration to contain the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Oil of the sick, which used to be known as “Extreme Unction,” (meaning Final Anointing or Last Rites) because it was thought to be used only on the patient who was virtually given up for dead was renamed by Pope Paul VI after Vatican II and is now called "oil of the anointing of the sick." In administering this sacrament, the priest anoints only the hands and forehead of the sick and is not given to persons who have died before the priest arrives. The aim of this holy oil anointing is to comfort, peace and courage the sick person (James 5: 14-15) and if they are unable to make a confession, forgiveness of their sins. This sacrament can be given privately or administered communally, as during a Mass.

Concerning the holy oils, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, one of the early Fathers of the Church wrote the following:

Beware of supposing that this ointment is mere ointment. Just as after the invocation of the Holy Spirit the Eucharistic bread is no longer ordinary bread, but the Body of Christ, so this holy oil, in conjunction with the invocation, is no longer simple or common oil, but becomes the gracious gift of Christ and the Holy Spirit, producing the advent [presence?] of His deity.

All through the Old Testament, Priests, Prophets and Kings were consecrated into office by holy anointing of their hands and/or their head (See Exodus 40: 13-15; Leviticus 8; 1 Sam 10:1; 1Chr. 29:22). At baptism, we too are anointed priests, prophet and king like Christ was (Luke 4:18).

In the early church, Sacred Chrism and the Eucharist were housed in a vessel known as the chrismal or chrismarium and this pyx was reserved in the tabernacle shaped like a dove, clearly signifying the Holy Spirit. Today, these oils are preserved in oil stock and kept in the sanctuary. They deserve our reverence because of what they mean as they effect what they signify in our lives, sacramentally.