

Research article

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## Consecration of Chrism: Symbol of Ecclesial Unity?

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**ABSTRACT:** In the course of history, the sanctification of the precious chrism/myron has become increasingly complex; the article investigates how, when and why this happened. Moreover, the consecratory ceremony evolved into a sign of ecclesial togetherness in a common celebration with the church leadership. In Byzantine-rite Orthodoxy, the costly and impressive ritual developed into a supra-diocesan prerogative of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. However, various other autocephalous churches, such as the Patriarchate of Moscow, hallow their own myron. Therefore, the ritual in question, also meant to unify global Orthodoxy, is not entirely pan-Orthodox. After having outlined this, the article concludes: On the one hand, the liturgy of confecting and consecrating chrism intends to demonstrate and bring about unity; on the other, the very same liturgy also reveals (at times) division, namely in situations of rupture of communion, insistence on one's own independence, and different convictions about the correct canonical order.

**KEYWORDS:** theology, liturgics, chrism, myron, autocephaly, Orthodox Church, ecclesial unity, Patriarchate of Constantinople, Patriarchate of Moscow

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Chrism/myron<sup>1</sup> is a “royal ointment, spiritual salve for the protection of life and sanctification of souls and bodies, oil of gladness... robe of incorruptibility and perfect-making seal” [*Barberini 336, 144*]. In such terms, the oration over the holy unguent on Great Thursday found in the ancient *codex Barberini graecus 336* praises its beneficial qualities<sup>2</sup>. Chrism is a major symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church and its worship. Its sanctification brings about that the oil mixed with the other essences is no longer merely a blend of all kinds of substances, but has been transformed into a sacred matter the Holy Spirit dwells in. According to Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386 or 387), the scented oil is no longer common, ordinary oil, but a graceful gift of Christ<sup>\*1,3</sup>. The mystical author who calls himself Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500) even qualifies holy myron as possessing the same theological significance as the Eucharist<sup>\*2</sup> [*Corpus Dionysiacaum, 95–104*]<sup>4</sup>. Also today, both clergy and laity consider this “oil of gladness”<sup>5</sup> most important and sacrosanct. The confection and subsequent consecration of chrism is, by all accounts, a key event in present-day Orthodox church life. Concurrently, it intersects with the manifold questions of ecclesial identity, autocephaly and unity.

The course of history manifestly demonstrates that the initially simple ritual of blessing perfumed oil used for the initiation of new Christians and other liturgical ends, has considerably developed. At first, perfumed oil needed for the unction after immersion was sanctified during baptism itself by the officiating clergy, be it a priest or a bishop. Then, a gradual change concerning the administration of the process of confecting and consecrating chrism took place. In the East, it became — probably by the end of the fifth century — increasingly the exclusive prerogative of bishops to oversee and direct the myron production and sanctification and preside at its rituals. Inasmuch as local synods continued to censure priests who for an extended period of time kept sanctifying chrism themselves, one may deduce that the transition from presbyteral to episcopal rights in this domain was an ambiguous and contentious issue, and that it might have taken several centuries before the canons which prescribed that the act of sanctifying myron be the bishops’ prerogative, were universally accepted and applied.

\*1 *Cyr. Hieros. Mystag. 3. 3*

\*2 *EH. 4*

1. Throughout this article, I use the words “myron” and “chrism” indiscriminately and interchangeably.

2. This euchologion dates from the second half of the eighth century and originates from southern Italy.

3. Cf.: [*Cyrill von Jerusalem, 126–127; Cyril of Jerusalem, 170–171*].

4. Cf. Nicholas Cabasilas. *The Life in Christ*, book 3 [*Nicholas Cabasilas, 103–112*]; Symeon, Archbishop of Thessalonica. *Περὶ τῆς ἱεράς τελετῆς τοῦ ἁγίου μύρου* [*Symeon of Thessalonica*].

5. Cf. Heb 1:9, Ps 44:8 and Is 61:3 (the latter two according to LXX).

The process of making and hallowing chrism took place once a year, especially on Thursday of Holy Week, a day appointed because of its proximity to Easter, when myron was needed for the initiation sacraments. In Eastern Christianity, however, instead of the annual enactment of the consecration ritual, it became common to do so only done when need arose, that is, every so many years. Moreover, there, the bishops' prerogative to consecrate myron was gradually reserved to the "πρωτος" of each local church (the patriarch, metropolitan or archbishop, respectively). In the Byzantine rite, the transition of this prerogative to the πρωτος probably happened in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the West-Syriac tradition, this may have occurred during the thirteenth century, and in the Armenian one already in the late 17<sup>th</sup> — early 18<sup>th</sup> century. At any rate, the transition in question was a gradual process, and there existed considerable differences from one region to another [*Hermann; Tinatin et al., 207–208*] <sup>6</sup>.

There are in fact two key reasons of limiting the privilege of hallowing myron to the πρωτος. First, the process of preparing the "heavenly salve" became more and more complex. Second, there was a noted tendency toward centralization of ecclesial authority and, as for the Byzantine rite, emphasizing the coordinating role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople<sup>7</sup>. Because of the growing impact of this patriarchate, also in liturgical matters, it began to reserve the privilege of sanctifying the holy myrrh to itself. Strikingly, today the patriarch of Constantinople and the other bishops in attendance say the consecratory oration over the chrism jointly [*Τὸ Ἅγιον Μύρον, 28–29*]. One could regard this common simultaneous enactment as a soft, indirect reference to former practice.

Alongside the contemporary impressive consecration ceremony and the participation of all ecclesial ranks (although the hierarchy clearly dominates), it is especially the use of myron in the initiation sacraments that makes it a primary sign of its interconnectedness with the sacraments and the whole of ecclesial worship, and of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. Hence, besides baptismal and Eucha-

6. According to [*Renoux*], already before the ninth century, the Armenian patriarch had the prerogative of consecrating myron.

7. For a concise overall study on the development of primacy and tension with the principle of synodality in both Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, see: [*Serving Communion*].

ristic ecclesiology, one might also speak of “chrismatic ecclesiology”, a foaming source of ecclesial life [*Stramara*]. Certainly, myron and its sanctification are meant to constitute a cohesive bond within the Orthodox Church, intersecting its hierarchy, especially its *πρῶτος*, with actual liturgical life in dioceses, parishes and monastic communities. Thus, one could compare it with the commemoration of the primates of the sister churches in the diptychs and the “irenic letters” which a new *πρῶτος* sends to his confreres.

As we shall see in this concise article<sup>8</sup>, various autocephalous churches obtain their chrism from Constantinople, whereas others produce and sanctify their own. The former include the Churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, the Czech Lands and Slovakia, Mount Sinai, Finland and Estonia. Given this divergence, we may ask whether the process of confecting and consecrating myron constitutes, in addition to a visible sign of unity *within* any Orthodox church, also a token of *inter-Orthodox* togetherness. Is it, or should it be, also a pan-Orthodox symbol of unity? Let me give a few examples of the disparate history of our subject.

Serbia has changed its course: Initially, after Constantinople granted it autocephaly (1879), ordering it simultaneously to procure its chrism from the Bosphorus, Belgrade obtained it from there, but then began to confect its own and is still doing so. The “Macedonian Orthodox Church”, however, which in 1967 unilaterally declared its independence from the Patriarchate of Serbia, also stopped acquiring its sacred myrrh from there and now consecrates its own, with the archbishop in Skopje presiding and the chrism also being sent to the parishes abroad. But because the Serbian Patriarchate and other Orthodox regard this church as schismatic, its myron is also deemed invalid. Presently, the Patriarchate of Serbia possesses again some ecclesial structures in the Republic of North Macedonia, and these obtain their myron from Belgrade.

By contrast, the Church of Greece, bound in its autocephaly tomos (1850) to obtain its chrism from Constantinople, still holds on to this regulation. Before, when the Greek uprising against the Ottoman empire broke out and the patriarchate in the imperial city condemned the insurrection (1821), the rebellious Hellenes, who also proclaimed ecclesial autocephaly, were no longer allowed to get chrism from Con-

8. In collaboration with a Greek colleague, Chrysostom Nassis (Aristotle University of Thessalonica), I have written a much longer version, with ample

bibliography: [*Groen, Nassis*]. That article examines also the confecting and consecration of chrism in other churches, both Oriental and Occidental.

stantinople. This prohibition, however, was circumvented and after Constantinople signed the aforementioned tomos, thus terminating the schism, the Church of Greece could officially again obtain myron from the patriarchate<sup>9</sup>.

Does already the Serbian example candidly display that the consecration service at the Phanar is not fully pan-Orthodox, this becomes even clearer when we note that also the Patriarchates of Moscow, Georgia, Romania and Bulgaria produce and consecrate chrisms themselves. Dwelling on the Moscow Patriarchate for a while, we find corroborative evidence that the *πρώτος* prerogative to preside over the chrisms consecration ritual possesses a changeable history. We need to look, in this framework, first at Ukraine. In ca. 1590 — some six years before the Union of Brest was concluded, — the metropolis of Kiev, then still under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, obtained from the latter the right to consecrate and distribute its own myron. It is possible that the practice of preparing and sanctifying chrisms on the part of the metropolitan of Kiev began even earlier, namely in the mid-fifteenth century. Whatever the exact date may have been, important reasons for the local production were the vast population, the long and perilous journey, and the predicaments and penury of the patriarchate at the Bosphorus, as the confection of the holy myrrh with its high number of fragrances was a costly affair. During the period between 1520 and 1570, chrisms were not even consecrated in Constantinople altogether. Actual practice in Ukraine went even beyond the metropolitan's prerogative because, from the end of the sixteenth century, every Ruthenian bishop was entitled to sanctify myron, doing so every year on Great Thursday. These prerogatives, however, were later repealed by Moscow (after the Letter of 1686 was issued by the Patriarchate of Constantinople regarding the metropolis of Kiev) and were maintained only in the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic tradition. Sometimes Ukraine also invited the help of other patriarchs. In 1667, for instance, the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch jointly performed the ritual in Ukraine and were generously rewarded (“quid pro quo”)<sup>10</sup>.

Then, at its synod in Moscow in 1675, Russia officially confirmed its practice to enact the myron consecration ritual itself, at that time operating so in both Moscow and Kiev. Presently, the service is cele-

9. According to [Frazee, 62, 140, 177, 182, 188], independent Greece got no chrisms from Constantinople during the schism. However, Bishop Agathangelos of

Phanarion publishes documents pertaining to circumvention: [Αγαθάγγελος].

10. See: [Nowakowski; Dupuy; Gudziak].

brated in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow; the last time happened in 2022. In addition, the Old Believers in Russia produce their own chrism, just as the Old Calendarists in Greece do. The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (established in 1920) has occasionally sanctified its own myron, received it sometimes from the Patriarchate of Serbia, and after its reunion with the Patriarchate of Moscow in 2007 gets it again from the latter's central depository. The Orthodox Church in America (OCA), too, performs the myron consecration ceremony on its own: When the Patriarchate of Moscow in 1970 declared the OCA's autocephaly, in the autocephaly tomos it authorized the OCA to consecrate its own chrism. Furthermore, the tomos of autocephaly for the newly-established Orthodox Church of Ukraine signed on 5 January 2019, obliges that church to draw its myron from the "First-Throne Church of Constantinople" as affirmation of its spiritual unity with the "Centre of Orthodoxy" [*The Ecumenical Patriarchate*, 81]<sup>11</sup>. By contrast, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in communion with the Patriarchate of Moscow continues to receive its chrism from the Russian capital. This again demonstrates that the question of who provides chrism is a token of the controversial issues of autocephaly, autonomy, unity and division.

It is obvious that there exists incongruity between two principles: on the one hand, every autocephalous church is entitled to confect and sanctify its own myron and, on the other, the Ecumenical Patriarchate possesses a primacy of honour and considers itself the spiritual centre of Orthodoxy. In that capacity, it is intent to coordinate relations within the Orthodox world and undertake pan-Orthodox initiatives. History, however, reveals that Constantinople has often not been able to carry its propositions through and at times has also voluntarily ceded its rights to other churches. The myron consecration ceremony at the Phanar is, therefore, an inter-Orthodox sign of unity but at the same time, this holds only to a certain extent true and does not concern all Orthodox churches. So the overall picture is highly complex: several Orthodox churches receive their myron from Constantinople, whereas others consecrate chrism themselves and have even supplied it to sister churches temporarily not in communion with Constantinople. At any rate, accepting chrism from another patriarchate does not automatically mean that the recipient recognizes the supreme authority of the giver. It deserves, incidentally, mention that throughout

11. I cannot dig here into this subject, highly contentious in global Orthodoxy. See, e. g.: [*Bremer, Senyk*].

the twentieth century, several patriarchs of Constantinople have proposed to their synods to send some newly consecrated chrism to sister churches which produce and consecrate their own.

In sum: on the one hand, the liturgy of confecting and consecrating chrism both demonstrates and brings about unity, whereas on the other, the very same liturgy reveals at times also division, namely in situations of rupture of communion, insistence on one's own independence, and different convictions about the correct canonical order.

Even so, faith, liturgy, ecclesiology, the "lex orandi" and the "lex credenda" continue to belong together and be entwined: the way the church prays and celebrates defines its faith, and its faith constitutes its worship. This entanglement, however, must be joined with the "lex vivendi/agenda". The way the church prays and celebrates is not alone in defining its faith, but these two "laws" must determine the manner of living and acting and, vice versa, the right way of living and doing things lays down the correct manner of worshipping and believing<sup>12</sup>. Hence, confecting and consecrating chrism should be tied up to ecclesial communal concern, care and reciprocal service, and be coupled with being spiritual chrism, a "fragrant smell"<sup>\*1</sup> for one another.

\*1 Cf. Eph 5:2

## Abbreviations

*Cyr. Hieros. Mystag.* Cyril of Jerusalem. The Mystagogical Homilies  
*EH* Pseudo-Dionysius. The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

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