

15th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

Jesus shares his spiritual authority with the disciples in today's gospel and sends them out in pairs. At the end of the gospel we heard: *'So they set off to preach repentance; and they cast out many devils, and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them.'* The only other reference in the New Testament to the use of oil during such times of ministry is found in the letter of James where he asks: *'Are there people sick among you? Let them send for the priests of the Church and let the priests pray over them anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise them up; and if they have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven.'*¹ It is this use of oil in the sacramental life of the Church that I would like to focus on today.

As the Lord uses physical things such as water in baptism, or bread and wine in the Eucharist, to bestow spiritual grace, so he uses oil to anoint. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains how *'Anointing, in Biblical and other ancient symbolism, is rich in meaning: oil is a sign of abundance and joy; it cleanses (anointing before and after a bath) and limbers (the anointing of athletes and wrestlers); oil is a sign of healing, since it is soothing to bruises and wounds; and it makes radiant with beauty, health, and strength. Anointing with oil has all these meanings in the sacramental life.'*² As in the Old Covenant oil was used to anoint priests, prophets and kings, so it is used in the New Covenant. Indeed, through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, we have all been anointed to share in Christ's office of priest, prophet, and king. At the Chrism Mass each Easter, the bishop blesses the Oil of the Sick, the Oil of Catechumens, and the Oil of Chrism which are to be used throughout the diocese in the coming year for the celebration of the sacraments.

The Oil of the Sick is used when celebrating the Sacrament of Anointing, and unites a person more closely to Christ the suffering servant. Because it also involves the forgiveness of sins, only priests and bishops can confer this Sacrament. The catechism states: *'By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that he may raise them up and save them. And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the Passion and death of Christ.'*³ It goes on to explain, how, *'From ancient times in the liturgical traditions of both East and West, we have testimonies to the practice of anointings of the sick with blessed oil. Over the centuries the Anointing of the Sick was conferred more and more exclusively on those at the point of death. Because of this it received the name "Extreme Unction." Notwithstanding this evolution the liturgy has never failed to beg the Lord that the sick person may recover his health if it would be conducive to his salvation'*⁴

Often, then, the Sacrament of Anointing is celebrated when one is close to death, but not exclusively. It can be received when one is about to undergo an operation, or indeed for serious and ongoing illness of any kind. While this sacrament unites one's suffering to the passion of Jesus for the sake of the world, we are also encouraged to pray for healing, and I think that this desire is brought out clearly in the following prayer that the bishop prays over the Oil of the Sick during the Chrism Mass: *'O God, Father of all consolation, who willed to heal the infirmities of the weak through your Son, listen favourably to the prayer of faith: send forth from the heavens, we pray, your Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, upon this oil in all its richness, which you have graciously brought forth from the verdant tree to restore the body, so that by your holy blessing everyone anointed with this oil as a safeguard for body, soul and spirit, may be freed from all pain, all infirmity, and all sickness.'*

The Oil of Catechumens, meanwhile, is used to drive out evil. If you have attended a baptism, you may recall that a child or adult are first anointed with the Oil of Catechumens as a sign of exorcism. During the Rite of Baptism for a Child, the prayer of exorcism is as follows: *'Almighty and ever-living*

¹ James 5:14-15.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), Nos. 1293-4.

³ CCC 1499.

⁴ CCC 1512.

God, you sent your only Son into the world to cast out the power of Satan, spirit of evil, to rescue man from the kingdom of darkness, and bring him into the splendour of your kingdom of light. We pray for this child: set them free from original sin, make them a temple of your glory, and send your Holy Spirit to dwell with them.' As the child is anointed with the Oil of Catechumens, the minister continues: *'We anoint you with the oil of salvation in the name of Christ our Saviour: may he strengthen you with his power, who lives and reigns for ever and ever.'* During adult baptisms, the anointing with the Oil of Catechumens occurs during the profession of the faith, immediately after they *'renounce Satan, and all his works, and all his empty show.'* Any blessed oil, however, can also be used to combat evil when blessing homes, or indeed when simply praying with someone who may be experiencing spiritual difficulties.

Finally, the Oil of Chrism is used in sacraments to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit and the priestly, prophetic and kingly anointing. It is used during the baptism of children, but also in the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders. Speaking on the development of the sacrament of Confirmation, the Catechism states: *'Very early, the better to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit, an anointing with perfumed oil (chrism) was added to the laying on of hands. This anointing highlights the name "Christian," which means "anointed" and derives from that of Christ himself whom God "anointed with the Holy Spirit." ... In the West, Confirmation suggests both the ratification of Baptism, thus completing Christian initiation, and the strengthening of baptismal grace - both fruits of the Holy Spirit.'*⁵ In the ordination of priests and bishops, meanwhile, the anointing with the Oil of Chrism is *'a sign of the special anointing of the Holy Spirit who makes their ministry fruitful.'*⁶

God bless,

Fr Andy

⁵ CCC 1289.

⁶ CCC 1574.