

SACRED OILS

Sacred Oils

Paul Turner



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CATHERINÆ BERTRAND
HVNC VOLVMEN DEDICAT AVCTOR
SOBRINÆ SVÆ
ARTIFICI, PEREGRINO
SORORI SCHOLARVM NOSTRÆ DOMINÆ
QVI EVANGELIVM PROCLAMAT
VITAM EIVS DERIGIT
IN VNITATEM AD QVAM MITTEBATVR IESVS CHRISTVS
TOT FAMILIAM INSPIRAT QUOT SOCIETATEM EIVS
VOCATIONES RELIGIOSAS OLIM PROMOVIT
ET VT ANCILLA INTER ANCILLAS REXIT
PROPOSITA NVNC DISCERNIT
ATQVE MISSIONEM EIVSDEM CHRISTI SEMPER COMPLET
SACERDOTIS PROPHETÆ REGISQVE

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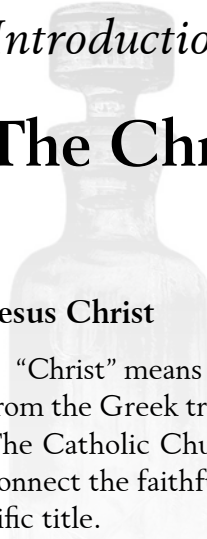
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Abbreviations

AS	Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum (typical edition)
CB	<i>Ceremonial of Bishops</i>
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>
GIRM	The General Instruction of the Roman Missal
OBC	<i>Order of Baptism of Children</i>
OBO	<i>The Order of Blessing the Oil of Catechumens and of the Sick and of Consecrating the Chrism</i>
OBP	Rites of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons
OConf	<i>The Order of Confirmation</i>
ODC	<i>The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar</i>
PCS	Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum (English edition)



Introduction

The Chrism Mass

Jesus Christ

“Christ” means “Anointed One.” The English word comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” The Catholic Church incorporates oils into its liturgies to connect the faithful back to the Son of God under this specific title.

In popular prayer, people often call upon the name of “Jesus,” a name that means “Savior.” In liturgical prayer, he is almost always given a title together with his name: “Lord,” “Christ,” or both. This practice confirms that believers address their prayers not to a mere historical mortal possessing nothing more than a name, but to the Son of God, who both lived on earth and lives in heaven, whose resurrection affirms his divine title.

The title “Christ” recalls prophecies. Jesus himself on the road to Emmaus catechized his fellow pilgrims by explaining from the scriptures how Moses and all the prophets foresaw that the Messiah, Christ, should suffer the way he did and so enter glory (Luke 24:26-27). The prophecies that the risen Jesus cited that day pertained to his status as the Anointed One.

Those who follow him call themselves “Christians”—disciples of the Anointed One, who themselves have been

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anointed. The name “Christians” emerged from the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. The newly converted Saul had already been teaching that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 9:22). The anointing metaphor had captured his imagination and fueled his catechesis. It also energized his opponents. After discovering a plot to take his life, Saul escaped Damascus by hiding inside a large basket that his friends lowered over the city wall. In Jerusalem, he then confronted disciples skeptical of the sincerity of his conversion, until Barnabas took charge of him (Acts 9:27). After that, Paul retreated to his hometown, Tarsus, where, so soon after his conversion and the start of his mission, he surprisingly spent some years in silence (Gal 1:18). Barnabas eventually sought him out and brought him to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26), reigniting Paul’s zeal and relaunching his now meteoric mission. Together they spent a year meeting with the local church and educating many people (Acts 11:26). Their teaching in Antioch must have focused on Jesus as the Messiah, which made everyone hunger for an association with him as the Christ. It was then, together with Paul’s renewed mission, that the disciples first became known as Christians, a title derived from oil.

All four gospels record that, at some point in Jesus’ public ministry, a woman had anointed him. Matthew and Mark say that she anointed his head (Matt 26:7; Mark 14:3). Luke tells of a woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee who anointed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:38). John situates the event six days before Jesus’ final Passover in the home of Martha, where the resuscitated Lazarus joined the meal, and Jesus’ friend Mary anointed his feet with pure nard (John 12:3). Jesus said that the anointing prepared for his burial. The action confirmed his mortality, and it stirred the belief that he was the Messiah.

After the resurrection, the community of believers recalled those who had gathered against God’s holy servant

Jesus, whom God had anointed (Acts 4:27). Peter specifically interpreted the baptism of Jesus as a metaphorical anointing. All four gospels record the baptism, as does Acts of the Apostles in Peter's speech to the household of Cornelius. Although the gospels report no pouring of physical oil at the Jordan River, Peter explained that in that baptism God had anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power (Acts 10:38).

To call Jesus the Anointed One puts him at the end of the line of Old Testament priests, prophets, and kings: The Lord told Moses to anoint Aaron and his sons, consecrating them as priests (Exod 30:30). Aaron's anointed sons enjoyed a perpetual priesthood throughout all future generations (Exod 40:15).

The Lord commanded the prophet Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor (1 Kgs 19:16). The prophet Isaiah declared how the Lord had anointed him to bring good news to the afflicted (Isa 61:1), a passage that Jesus applied to himself at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18).

Samuel poured oil over the head of Saul and declared that the Lord was anointing Saul as king (1 Sam 10:1). Samuel later anointed David, and the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon the new king.¹ Zadok anointed Solomon as king (1 Kgs 1:39).

Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Priest, the Prophet, and the King. His disciples call themselves Christians to affirm this belief and to share his mission. The Catholic Church assists them with sacred oils.²

1. 1 Sam 16:13; see also Ps 89:21.

2. See *The Order of Blessing the Oil of Catechumens and of the Sick and of Consecrating the Chrism* [OBO] (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019), intro. 2.

Oil

Trees produced the olives, and the olives produced the oil so abundant throughout the Old Testament Mediterranean world. Its production required considerable skill and intense labor. Even though the trees grew well in the local climate, farmers had to care for them, and workers had to harvest the olives. Someone had to carry heavy stones to an accessible site. Someone had to fashion them into a mill. Someone had to operate the mill, pressing the olives to release their treasure. Someone had to create flasks and arrange storage space. Someone had to collect the oil and carry it home. Though it often gives pleasure, oil results from hard work.

Olive oil served a variety of purposes. Bakers mixed it with flour. Cooks heated it for meals. Prophets anointed kings. Believers offered it in religious rituals and anointed sacred furnishings. Caretakers filled lamps to provide light. Athletes rubbed it on their bodies to prepare for exercise and to relax after exertion. Perfumers added aromas to fashion cosmetics. Healers applied it to relieve the sick. Mourners anointed the dead.

Today's chefs still favor "extra virgin" olive oil on salads. This first pressing of the fruit produces its "virginal extract." The light texture tastes best at room temperature. Later pressings of the same olives produce oil that heats well for cooking, sautéing, or baking.

In addition to ingesting oil into the body, people rub it onto the body. Topical applications help healing.

The ointment that the Catholic Church traditionally sets aside for religious purposes is olive oil. It immediately links contemporary worship with biblical testimony. As bread and wine are the foundational elements for the Eucharist because of biblical evidence, so sacramental oil has come from a biblically attested source: the olive.

However, evangelization has spread the Gospel beyond the lands where olives grow. Jesus commanded his disciples to teach all nations, and they responded admirably. The Gospel now touches corners of the globe where the expense of shipping olive oil proves burdensome.

Consequently, although the Catholic Church still prefers olive oil for its sacraments, it now allows oil extracted from other plants if that seems appropriate.³ The term for proper substances in worship is “matter.” Plant oil is the matter for anointing in the Catholic Church.

The Code of Canon Law has enshrined the same permission while it cautions not to use old oils.⁴ Each year the sacred oils are to be replaced anew.

The production of sacred chrism adds an aromatic source to plant oil. The traditional perfume is the resinous extract drawn from a balsam tree. Today the Catholic Church permits adding any fragrances or aromatic material (OBO, intro. 4). This increases the options for producing the sacred oils necessary for worship.

At its origins, oil was a common product, arduously produced, yet available as widely as bread, wine, and water. Even today, people use oils more than they may realize for food, hygiene, health, beauty, and honor. This common element, devoutly set aside, also performs sacred functions.

3. OBO, intro. 3; see also *The Rites, Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* [PCS], A Pueblo Book (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 20.

4. *Code of Canon Law* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), 847 §1.

The Day for the Chrism Mass

Each year the bishop of a diocese celebrates a Mass at which he prepares the oils that his priests and deacons will use throughout the year. Although he blesses both the oil of the sick and the oil of catechumens in the same ritual, the Roman Pontifical and the Roman Missal both call the ceremony the chrism Mass, named for the third and most sublime of the oils.

Thursday of Holy Week is the traditional date for the chrism Mass. The rites of initiation at the Easter Vigil require anointings. To provide the freshest of oils for these ceremonies, the bishop presided for this Mass close to that day. Because no Mass may be celebrated on Good Friday or during the day on Holy Saturday, the ceremony defaulted to Holy Thursday. This allowed priests to gather with the bishop that morning for a final Mass during Lent and to obtain the oils that they would need in the parishes for the sacred ceremonies about to come.

However, if it is difficult for the clergy and faithful to gather on the morning of Holy Thursday, the bishop may now celebrate the chrism Mass on an earlier day, still near Easter (OBO 10). Many bishops choose this option, celebrating on a date earlier in Holy Week or even the week prior. They commonly also change the time from morning to evening, when more of the faithful may participate. Celebrating the chrism Mass earlier than Holy Thursday may relieve the demanding preparations for the Sacred Triduum, which begins with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, continuing through the observance of Friday of the passion of the Lord, and concluding with the Easter Vigil and the Masses of Easter Sunday. An earlier chrism Mass better allows many people with parish responsibilities to participate in the diocesan event.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lives of millions, public gatherings ceased out of care for pub-

lic health. The Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments made two statements pertaining to the date of the chrism Mass. On March 19 it stated, "Having evaluated the concrete situation in the different countries, the Bishop has the faculty to postpone it to a later date."⁵ Then on March 25 it revised the statement this way: "Evaluating the concrete situation in different countries, the Episcopal Conferences will be able to give indications about a possible transfer to another date."⁶ Both versions gave a permission never before expressed: celebrating the chrism Mass at a different time of year, even after Easter. The joy of providing fresh oils for initiation yielded to the charitable responsibility of keeping people safe.

Nonetheless, in a normal year, the celebration of the chrism Mass in the days before the Paschal Triduum gathers representatives of the diocesan church to praise God and pray for those who will be anointed with these oils throughout the coming year.

The Structure of the Chrism Mass

In planning the chrism Mass, a fundamental decision pertains to the sequence of the ceremonies. In its original form, the blessing of the oil of the sick takes place within the eucharistic prayer, just before the final doxology and amen,

5. Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "In Time of COVID-19," <http://www.cultodivino.va/content/cultodivino/it/documenti/decreti-general/decreti-general/2020/decreto-triduo-pasquale-2020.html>.

6. Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "In Time of COVID-19 (II)," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20200325_decreto-intempodicovid_en.html.

whereas the blessing of the oil of catechumens and the consecration of chrism occur after communion (OBO 11). Alternatively, “for pastoral reasons,” the bishop may pray over all three oils in close sequence after the Liturgy of the Word (OBO 12, 26).

This second option makes the ceremony resemble some rituals that may take place during Mass, including confirmations and ordinations. Yet other celebrations, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals, spread elements of the ceremony throughout the Mass. Some communities have taken the second structural option for so many years that people may not realize that the first option still exists.

One reason why many dioceses choose to combine the prayers over the oils earlier in the Mass is a practical one: Volunteers need time to pour the oils into smaller containers for transport to the local churches. After the consecration of the chrism, they may carry large vessels from the sanctuary to a nearby workspace, leaving behind symbolic smaller vessels for the remainder of the liturgy.

The chrism Mass flows according to one of these two possibilities. Within the chosen structure, other variations arise.

Most noteworthy, when the vessels arrive in the sanctuary, the ministers who carry them announce the names in this order: the oil for the holy chrism, the oil of the sick, and then the oil of catechumens. After each announcement, the ministers place the appropriate vessel on a specially prepared table (OBO 18).

In practice, though, one commonly sees the oils announced in the order in which the bishop will pray over them: the oil of the sick, the oil of catechumens, and then the oil for chrism. Furthermore, although the rubrics envision that the ministers announce the oils and set them in place before the bishop prays over any of them, often they are presented one by one, the bishop’s prayer following the announcement and place-

ment of each of the oils. Even the Vatican follows this practice.⁷ Perhaps because the ceremony is performed only once a year, its variations stand out in greater relief—both the ones enshrined in the liturgical books and the ones improvised.

The chrism Mass shows one way that the liturgy of the church evolves, accommodating local practices to express divine realities.

The Presentation of the Oils

The oils for Catholic worship are so valued that people formally present them to the bishop within the liturgy of the chrism Mass. First the priests renew their promises, the bishop asks the people to pray for their priests, and they participate in a short litany, which constitutes the universal prayer for this Mass. Then the procession of oils begins.

Deacons and ministers present the oils (OBO 16). If there are no deacons, then priests may assist. They form a procession together with members of the faithful who will carry the gifts for the Mass: the bread, wine, and optionally the water.

Lay ministers may carry the oils designated for the sick and for catechumens, as well as the vessel containing the fragrance. Ordained ministers carry the oil to be consecrated for the chrism. Deacons may carry all of the oil, but including lay people in the procession shows the diversity of ministries in the church and better manifests the entire people of God who benefit from these oils. In some dioceses, those who assist the preparation of adults for initiation, as well as those who prepare parents for the baptism of their children, may carry the oil to be blessed for catechumens and infants. Similarly, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion who bring

7. See, for example, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2019/20190418-libretto-messa-crismale.pdf, 71–75.

the sacrament to the homebound and hospitalized may carry the oil to be blessed for the sick. These oils will be administered by ordained clergy, but lay people may assist those who anticipate an anointing.

The oils are carried together with the gifts for the Mass. Although many people refer to this as the “offertory procession,” its proper title is “procession of the gifts.” The “offering” of the Mass happens during the eucharistic prayer. Nonetheless, the inclusion of oil in this procession is unique and significant. Bread and wine are the essential gifts. Water is optional, as are financial contributions for the church and the poor. Other items do not belong in the procession—purificators, corporals, or the finger bowl, for example.

The oils do appear in this procession because they are part of the gifts presented at this Mass. As a celebrant consecrates bread and wine for a sacred purpose in the Mass, so a bishop blesses and consecrates oils. As the bread and wine are fruits of the earth and the work of human hands, so also is oil. The solemn appearance of oil in this procession heightens the anticipation of its future use.

The rubrics say that the ministers present the vessels in this order: first the fragrances, then the oils to be blessed for catechumens and for the sick, and finally the oil to be consecrated for chrism. In those places where the oils are presented one by one immediately before the bishop prays over each, he usually receives the oils for catechumens and the sick first and then the fragrances, just before the oil for chrism.

Nonetheless, the rubrics envision that the fragrances come first, without explaining why. Perhaps they are considered of lesser importance than the oils because they are only an addition. Or perhaps they are extremely important, and their presentation first in the procession anticipates the solemn mixing of chrism.

The prayer after communion for the chrism Mass refers to the fragrances as well as to a verse from the letters of Saint Paul, which calls the community of the faithful “the aroma of Christ to God” (2 Cor 2:15). The bishop prays that those renewed by receiving communion may thereby become “the pleasing fragrance of Christ.”⁸

No incense accompanies this procession, which is true in general for the procession of the gifts at any Mass. The bread and wine will be incensed after they have been placed on the altar as a symbol of their offering, and incense will lead the procession of the oils at the end of the Mass to show their sacredness. At the procession of the gifts, the bishop receives ordinary oil along with ordinary bread and ordinary wine, unaccompanied by incense.

The Presider of the Chrism Mass

The bishop of the diocese presides for the chrism Mass. Under certain circumstances, a priest may bless the oils of catechumens and of the sick (OBO 7–8), but the bishop alone consecrates chrism (6). He is regarded as the high priest of the flock (1). He directs the conferring of baptism for his diocese.⁹ He is the chief steward of the mysteries of God,¹⁰ the high priest who in turn confers a royal priesthood on the faithful through baptism. Although priests and deacons are also ordinary ministers of baptism, the bishop is the ultimate source of baptismal ministry. Because of his role, the chrism Mass expresses more meaning when members of the faithful fill the cathedral as their bishop presides.

8. Roman Missal, The Chrism Mass 14.

9. Christian Initiation, General Introduction 12.

10. Christian Initiation, General Introduction, referring to 1 Cor 4:1.

Priests and deacons assist the bishop's ministry, so their presence also enhances the chrism Mass. They use chrism when they baptize, they may anoint catechumens and infants, and priests anoint the sick. Their attendance establishes a direct connection between the bishop's prayer over each oil and their administration of it in the sacraments. Especially when priests and deacons anoint with chrism, they hold in their hands a sign of their bishop, the one who was anointed high priest and who directs the conferral of baptism.

The Priests at the Chrism Mass

The rubrics urge the priests to concelebrate the chrism Mass with their bishop. Various regions of the diocese are to send representative priests for this purpose (OBO 1). This shows the spread of the bishop's ministry, demonstrates the unity of priests under his leadership, and provides a practical means for priests to secure the oils they need at home. Priests who concelebrate are the bishop's "witnesses and co-workers in the ministry of the sacred Chrism" (OBO 14).

Priests concelebrate more commonly in the era after the Second Vatican Council than they ever did before. People may see concelebrants at events such as funerals or when priests are visiting. Within religious houses, priests may concelebrate at the community's daily Mass. Before the council, concelebration was rare, but it did happen. It existed especially at ordinations, when the newly ordained priests recited the eucharistic prayer together with the bishop, as well as at the chrism Mass. A priest may mistakenly feel as though the chrism Mass is just another concelebration among many others, but he is participating in a long history of a unique permission to concelebrate with a bishop at one of the most solemn occasions of the year.

The physical arrangement of the priests for the oils ceremony indicates the singularity of this celebration. The rubric says that the bishop is “surrounded by the concelebrating Priests” (OBO 22). In ordinary circumstances of concelebration, the priests may surround the altar at the eucharistic prayer. But at this moment, apart from the eucharistic prayer, the priests surround the bishop who conducts the ceremony on another table in the sanctuary.

The Latin expression for the arrangement of the priests with their bishop is *in modum coronæ* (OBO 21). Translators puzzled over how best to express this in English.¹¹ They considered such options as “like a crown,” “on either side,” or “in a curved formation.” Although “like a crown” is the most literal translation, it sounded more theological than rubrical. In the end, “surrounding” appears in the published book. Nonetheless, the reference to a “crown” in Latin does impart at least a poetic interpretation, if not a theological one. It recalls the Old Testament tradition that among those anointed were kings. The priests arranging themselves like a crown around their bishop suggests that the anointed bishop fulfills a royal role in preparing the oil and that his priests represent a jewel of his ministry.

The Deacons at the Chrism Mass

Deacons are ordinary ministers of baptism, a ceremony in which they administer the oil of catechumens and sacred chrism. Even so, their appearance at the chrism Mass seems more to serve the ceremony of the day than the future

11. The author serves as a facilitator at the meetings of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) and shares personal recollections in passages such as this.

administration of the oils. The priests who concelebrate, by contrast, present an image of unity, witness, and collaboration. Priests show their unity of purpose with the bishop in that they will also administer the oil of the sick on his behalf, and on occasion they will confirm with chrism.

Deacons taking part in the chrism Mass join the entrance procession ahead of the concelebrants (OBO 15). Three of them may have special roles in any celebration with the bishop: two to assist him and one to proclaim the gospel and minister at the altar.¹² Often in practice, a master of ceremonies assists the bishop, and two deacons divide the responsibilities of the Mass, one active through the Liturgy of the Word, and the other prominent through the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

As the ceremony for the oils begins, assisting deacons go to the sacristy or the place where the vessels rest, in order to help carry them (OBO 16). The only vessel that requires the service of a deacon or priest is the one holding the oil to be consecrated for chrism. Lay ministers may carry the others. Still, deacons take a significant part in moving the ceremony forward at this time.

In the sanctuary, as the oils arrive, deacons assist the bishop (OBO 18). The ministers each announce the oil they carry and offer it to the bishop, but deacons place them on the specially prepared table. At a typical Mass, deacons may help receive the gifts of bread and wine and arrange the altar before the priest steps up to preside. So, too, they arrange the gift of the oils that will become part of the solemn exercises to follow.

12. *Ceremonial of Bishops* [CB] (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), 26.

Deacons practice a threefold ministry: liturgy, preaching, and charity. Many Catholics especially see deacons carry out their liturgical role, vested in stole and dalmatic, at Masses in their parishes. With their words they proclaim the Gospel, they invite the sign of peace, and they command the dismissal; by their deeds they assist with the physical arrangements at the altar of the Eucharist. At the chrism Mass, the liturgical role of a deacon is more complex. His faithful ministry at the altar throughout the year prepares him for his special ministry in the sanctuary on this day. Those deacons who do not have an active role in the sanctuary still vest for the chrism Mass, sharers of the ministry that proclaims the Gospel in word and deed throughout the diocese and under the bishop.

Redeemer

Singing accompanies the procession of the oils. Musicians may lead any suitable song, but the traditional hymn for this occasion carries the Latin title *O Redemptor*, along with this refrain: “O Redeemer, hear your people, as they join in song to you” (OBO 17).

These words appear almost superficial at first. The people who sing them merely identify themselves as the people who sing them. However, they declare that they belong to Christ and that the song is addressed to Christ. The rubric says that a schola or choir sings the verses, but all the people join in the refrain. The full meaning of this hymn requires the vocal participation of the assembly.

The people address Christ as “Redeemer.” One might expect people especially at this Mass to address Jesus as the Christ, the Anointed Son of God. However, the assembly calls him “Redeemer,” a title that at once evokes the meaning

of the birth name Jesus (“Savior”) and the purpose of his life to be revealed on Easter Sunday: redemption.

A few prayers at every Mass address Christ, especially around the time for communion; for example, the Lamb of God and the private prayer of the priest before he receives communion. However, most liturgical prayers address the Father through Jesus Christ. The chrism Mass provides a rare example of a hymn addressed to the Second Person of the Trinity.

The halves of each verse rhyme in English, which is not true of the original Latin. ICEL developed this rendering around the time it was translating hundreds of Latin hymns from the Liturgy of the Hours. In that project, the translators agreed *not* to rhyme the stanzas. They feared that each hymn’s theological depth would be compromised if they limited the vocabulary to words that rhyme in a proper cadence. The hymn “O Redeemer” shows that ICEL can create rhymes; the challenges here were not as great as in many other hymns.

The verses aptly prepare for the ceremony just beginning. The first verse recalls the trees that provided the oil that the people are now presenting. The nature of those trees, “olive,” appears in the second verse. The source of their energy, the sunlight, appears in the first verse. By singing “we present” the oil, the people associate the procession with the presentation of their other gifts for the Eucharist.

The verses then explain the properties of chrism. In baptism it makes “both men and women new” and drives away “all taint of sin.” In confirmation “holy gifts come flooding in.” One verse says that chrism heals “wounded nature’s glory.” The word “heals” makes one think that the verse comments on a different oil, that of the sick. But the hymn does not affirm that this oil heals the physical body; rather,

it accompanies baptism, which restores the original glory of humanity wounded by sin. Even chrism heals.

Although the church also uses chrism for the ordination of bishops and priests and for the anointing of altars and church walls, the complete focus of this particular hymn—and of most of the chrism Mass—is on the use of chrism in the sacraments of initiation that unify all the faithful followers of Christ, lay and clergy alike.

Each Christian is anointed like Christ, but Christ alone is the Redeemer of Christians. His mission continues every time a follower is anointed with sacred oil.