

THE SPECIFICITY OF ORTHODOX MARIOLOGY REFLECTED IN THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY UNCTION. A BIBLICAL, LITURGICAL AND PATRISTIC ARGUMENTATION

Deac. PhD. Cătălin VATAMANU
Faculty of Orthodox Theology „Dimitru Stăniloae”,
„A.I. Cuza” University of Iassy

Abstract

Listening without ceasing our prayers, the Mother of God always comes to us as quick helping, „door of compassion”, „through which the world is shown full of mercy”. More than any other Holy Mystery, the Mystery of Holy Unction is the Mystery of consolation for all the sad, for them the Mother of God remained, with her quality of mediator to Christ, „alone art a speedy Intercessor”. Therefore she is invoked as „fervent Intercession”, „impregnable Wall”, „Fountain of Mercy”, „Refuge of the world”. She has received from Christ the Lord the power to unravel, by „the consolation of prayers”, the suffering of the sick people. The Mother of God has the power to make forgiving „the One God, who with his mercy and compassion heals all the passions of souls and the crushing of bodies”, making us partakers of „unfathomable Abyss of Goodness”.

Keywords: Sacrament of Holy Unction, Mother of God, healing, prayer, Christian Anthropology

The redemption is not the result of a legal process, but the goal of the cooperation in grace of God and man. In this theandric process of deification, following the „epectatic” contemplation of God, there is no separation between personal effort of man and the work of the Spirit of God, although they are distinct, no confused. Who works their salvation works the salvation of every Christian, individually, and of the Church, as a whole.

The faith requires the communion, the discovery of eternal value in the fellowman, which makes possible my manifestation as a person capable of communion with God. Love involves two persons, two „I”:

the one who gives and the other who receives. It is what unites them without confusing them because the confusion destroys the love. By loving our neighbour we show willingness to abandon our self, this being not a depersonalization that cancels our freedom and identity, but a shift of our gravity centre from selfishness to love in Christ. Therefore, in the life of the Church each person prays for other pleading forgiveness of sins and the establishment of the state of grace.

The Holy Unction is the Sacrament in which the unity of the militant and the triumphant Church's prayer lead to sharing the healing gifts of the Holy Spirit upon the physically and spiritually sick believer, as the revealed Scripture of the New Testament assures us: „Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (James 5, 13-15).

This Holy Mystery reveals the great mercy of God, the great value that the man has in the Holy Trinity plan.

If we consider that man tried by illness is often on the point of despair, we can explain why the prayers uttered in the Sacrament of Holy Unction invoke the intercession of the Virgin Mary to acquire the healing grace of the Holy Trinity, which gives us power towards victory. The hope that Christ sufferers together with the sick give the strength of repentance and of physical and spiritual rehabilitation that restores the man in the presence of God. For the sick man, Christ becomes the doctor who watches for healing and also is the crown of victory gained at the end of weaknesses.

The verb „to mercy” and related nouns – „mercy”, „pity”, „compassion”, „charity”, „mile” – are repeated with endurance the Sacrament of Holy Unction text, showing, on the one hand, the desire to cure the sick and, on the other hand, the belief that physical and spiritual rehabilitation can only come from the Merciful Christ „the Doctor of our souls and bodies”.

The service of Holy Unction is full of prayers that invoke God's mercy and a summary of their contents would truncate the patristic

soteriological truth. The first prayer of the seventh ode reveals through its theological complexity the descendant meaning of grace and its consequences for humans: „O Thou Who alone art God, O Savior, Who in Thy mercy and compassions healest the spiritual sufferings and bodily wounds of all: Be Thou Physician for this person that suffers in afflictions, and Thyself heal him (her)”¹.

One can easily see that by the grace of this Sacrament is offered to the man, primarily, the gift of body's healing. Therefore, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae says, Mystery of Holy Unction „can be considered par excellence the Mystery of the body”². The human body, assumed in the unique hypostasis of the Son of God by being born from the Virgin Mary, regains the dignity lost through the sin. The new man, reborn spiritually through Holy Baptism, it may bear fruit the gifts received to a plenary union with the Risen Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The invoking of God's Mother with perseverance in the prayer of Holy Unction³ comes as a soteriological necessity. The Holy Virgin Mary has born the Son of God from her flesh, being a body different from ours, but as ours, except sin. Through the Incarnation, Christ enters in „a perfect communion with God, as a man, and in a perfect communion with humans, as God. In communion with Him, every man is in a perfect communion with all Persons of Holy Trinity”⁴.

The mystery of the Christ Incarnation is one with the mystery of our salvation. In this divine-human work, the Mother of God shows her willingness for full cooperation with the Deity, devoting herself.

¹ *The Office of Holy Oil*, Ode VII. The Romanian referenced text is *Molitfelnic*, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1998, pp. 102-136. The English translation is according to *The Office of Holy Oil (Anointing)*, published by the Orthodox electronically library at <http://www.fatheralexander.org>. At this text we will refer in this study.

² Pr. prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, ediția a II-a, EIBMBOR, București, 1997, p. 136.

³ I inserted, sometimes, prayers to the Mother of God, collected from the liturgical tradition of the Church, to show, on one hand, the identity of dogmatic doctrine, unchanged, and, on the other hand, the specificity of the Holy Unction Mystery regarding the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These texts are from *Ceaslov*, Editura Mitropoliei Moldovei și Sucevei, Iași, 1990.

⁴ Pr. prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 59.

Incarnation is therefore not a forced act, imposed by the omnipotence of God, but the following of a dialogue and of a full responsible response of the Holy Virgin: „Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. (...) And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of His ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end». Mary said to the angel: «How can this be, since I am a virgin?» The angel said to her: «The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be holy; He will be called Son of God. (...) Then Mary said: «Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.» (Luke 1, 28-38).

According to the words of Holy Scripture and Holy Fathers before him, Nicholas Cabasilas states in his homily on the feast of the Annunciation: „The Incarnation of the Word was not only the work of the Father, of his Power [the Son], and of his Spirit – the first consenting, the second descending, the third overshadowing – but it was also the work of the will and faith of the Virgin. Without the three divine persons this design could not have been set in motion; but likewise the plan could not have been carried into effect without the consent and faith of the all-pure Virgin. Only after teaching and persuading her does God makes her his Mother and receives from her the flesh that she consciously wills to offer him. Just as He was conceived by his own free choice, so in the same way she became His Mother voluntarily and with her free consent”⁵. And this response was not merely a foregone conclusion; Mary was indeed chosen by God, but for her own part she also made a decisive act of free choice. In the epigrammatic phrase of Cabasilas, „The Word of God is formed through the word of his Mother”⁶. This is the *Eucharistic attitude* of Holy Virgin

⁵ Nicholas Cabasilas, *On the Annunciation*, II, 4-5, apud Paul Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, translated by Gabriela Moldoveanu, Editura Asociației Christiana, București, 1995, p. 217.

⁶ *Ibidem*, II, 10, apud *vol. cit.*, p. 217.

Mary: receiving the gift of the Son of God for the salvation of entire humanity and gratitude because in this moment she is convinced that she doesn't give birth someone sanctified, but to the most Holy who sanctifies her. One songs of Holy Unction says the same: „Nature accepted, as a most-glorious crown, thy divine birthgiving, O Pure One, which crushed the hosts of the enemies, and vanquished them with might. Therefore, crowned with festal brightness by thy grace, we hymn thee, O most-lauded Sovereign Lady”⁷.

The one born of the Theotokos' womb is Christ the whole, human and divine. Through the Incarnation, He doesn't splits into two, but is eternally the Son of God and Son of Man. Saint Paul says: „One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and *through* all, and *in* you all” (Eph. 4, 5-6). Christ is *above* all because He is God the Creator, is *by* all because He is God the Provider and He is *in* all through faith and fellowship with Him.

The prayers of Holy Unction Sacrament strengthens these statements and testifies strongly the Incarnation of Son of God from Holy Virgin Mary which becomes the „ Mother of the Creator of All”⁸ and that „who didst receive in thy womb in a manner befitting God Him that holds all things in the hollow of His hand”⁹.

The whole Mariology is included in the expression „Mother of God” reality sealed in the Mystery of the Incarnation. With solid bases in the Holy Scripture (Psalm 44, 11; Isaiah 7, 14; 61, 10; Matthew 1, 23; Luke 1, 26-49; 11, 27-28), the worshiping of Our Lady is also supported by the Mystery of hypostatic union in single Person of Christ Incarnate. Who was born from the Virgin is „true God from true God” the same essence with God the Father and

⁷ *The Office of Holy Oil...*, Now and ever... (Ode VIII).

⁸ *Ibidem*, Now and ever... (Ode III): „Look down favorably from on high, O Mother of the Creator of All, and, by thy prayers, release from bitter pain him (her) that is afflicted”.

⁹ *Ibidem*, Now and ever... (Ode VII): „O Thou, the Mother of God, who didst receive in thy womb in a manner befitting God Him that holds all things in the hollow of His hand, and didst give flesh to Him ineffably: Have mercy on him (her) that is suffering, we beseech thee”.

God the Holy Spirit. Between the Three Persons is not a division, but a distinction. They are united, but not confused, They share one another, but They do not replace each other. Through Incarnation, the Son of God makes possible to coexist in the assumed human body the unlimited and the limited, the created and the uncreated, the finite and infinite, without any of them losing their identity. In Christ, divinity and humanity are not merging, but they are in communion. This perfect communion is possible because the humanity assumed in Christ by birth from the Holy Virgin Mary is not autonomic, but theonomic. The humanity of Logos cannot be thought apart from the Logos, because the Birth of Christ is not biological, but supernatural.

Those mentioned above argue that the expression „Mother of God”, and many others like them used in the prayers of the Holy Unction will bring the sick the belief that the Mother of God has the power of a mother before her son, Christ the Lord, The One in the Trinity¹⁰. She is the Mother from which „God the Word was born” and therefore we glorify her as „true Birthgiver of God” (*Theotokos*)¹¹. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae says, „the attributes of Birthgiver and Mother of God expresses a deep intimacy relationship that has been established between the Virgin Mary and the Son of God incarnated”¹². This relationship empowers her prayer

¹⁰To the two songs mentioned above, I am adding: „*The door of compassion open to us, O blessed Virgin Birthgiver of God, that hoping in you, we may not perish, but through you may we be delivered from adversities, for you are the salvation of all Christians*” (the humility hymn to the Theotokos at the beginning of Holy Unction); Now and ever..., To the Theotokos (Ode VI): „Thou hast appeared as a fruitful olive tree in thy divine temple, O Mother of the Creator, through which the world is shown full of mercy (...)”.

¹¹Fragment of prayer „Truly you are worthy” (*Ἀξίον ἐστίν*): „It is truly right to bless thee, O Theotokos, ever blessed, and most pure, and the Mother of our God. More honorable than the cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim. Without corruption thou gavest birth to God the Word. True Theotokos, we magnify thee”.

¹²Dumitru Stăniloae, *Isus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, ediția a II-a, Editura Omniscop, Craiova, 1993, p. 165.

that, together with the earnest prayers of the saints, brings mercy and salvation for bodies and souls in tribulation¹³.

Another dogmatic reality repeatedly emphasized in the Mystery of Holy Unction is the Perpetual Virginity of the God's Mother: „O Most-holy, Ever-Virgin Theotokos, Mighty Shelter and Fortress, Refuge and Rampart, Ladder and Bulwark: Have mercy and compassion on him (her) that is afflicted. For unto thee alone has he (she) fled for refuge”¹⁴. The liturgical appellatives for the Mother of God express the state of perfection that she was crowned with: „door of heaven”, „sky”, „church of God”, „shrine”, „heaven” etc.¹⁵.

Already prophesied in the Old Testament (Genesis 3, 15; Psalms 44, 11; 45, 10-18; Isaiah 7, 14; Ezekiel 44, 1-3 etc.), this state of bodily and spiritual purity of the Theotokos shows, on one hand, the grace that she was awarded with by accepting the Birth of God's own Son and, on the other hand, shows her state of eternal humble obedience, but also the power with which she can intercede as Mother before Christ the Lord.

¹³ *The Office of Holy Oil...*, The Dismissal: „May Christ our true God, through the prayers of His Most-pure Mother; by the power of the honorable and life-giving Cross; of the holy, glorious and all-praised Apostle James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem and Brother of God; and of all the Saints; save us and have mercy on us, forasmuch as He is good and the Lover of Mankind”.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, Now and ever..., To the Theotokos (Ode IV): „O Most-holy, Ever-Virgin Theotokos, Mighty Shelter and Fortress, Refuge and Rampart, Ladder and Bulwark: Have mercy and compassion on him (her) that is afflicted. For unto thee alone has he (she) fled for refuge”.

¹⁵ From the Exapostilarion (Hymn of Light) of Tuesday. All these appellations are pedagogical because, in the proper sense, the Mother of God is none of these. For us to understand the mystery of his ever-virginity and her attribute of „Mother of God”, the hagiographs presented this through similarities with immediate realities.

Therefore, one of the prayers of The First Hour says: „What shall we call thee, O thou who art full of grace? Heaven, for from thee hast dawned forth the Sun of Righteousness. Paradise, for from thee bath blossomed forth the flower of immortality. Virgin, for thou hast remained incorrupt. Pure Mother, for thou hast held in thy holy embrace the Son, the God of all. Do thou entreat Him to save our souls”.

The Son of God is born as a real man „when the fullness of time had come”, not from a state of sin, but from a virtue: the virginity. The humanity assumed by Christ shall be one common to all men, because by saving the human nature assumed in himself, He heals the entire humanity. Unlike natural birth, woven with sinful lust, the supernatural Birth of Christ, which is not the result of a sinful human initiative, is the only who certifies the Birth so much expected in the history: Messiah, „the Anointed”, the Saviour¹⁶.

Fathers of the Church and contemporary theologians testify the Birth of Christ from Ever-Virgin Mary. Among the Latin Fathers, Blessed Augustine is known by the phrase: „*Virgo concepti, virgo peperit et post partum virgo permansit*”¹⁷. Saint John Damascene, fervent defender of Perpetual Virginity of the God’s Mother, shows the impossibility of the existence of any state of sin into her after the wonderful Birth of the Lord: „How could get close to a man she which gave birth to God and experienced the wonder from the facts they followed?”¹⁸. Recognizing the value of Saint Maximus the Confessor’ works, Urs von Balthazar concludes: „To break the dialectic of sin is demanded two conditions: a death that was not punishment for passion, and therefore, a birth from a virgin”¹⁹.

The „only Pure One”²⁰ and „too innocent” gives birth „without corruption” to „God the Word”²¹, thus becoming „pure palace of the heavenly Emperor”²², Church of Divinity. „The Holiness of God’s Mother derives especially from the Son of God, *the Holy One*, carried in herself since His conception as a Man in her womb, and she shows Him to the world beginning with His Birth in the

¹⁶ See Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos...*, p. 160.

¹⁷ „She conceived Him as a virgin, she gave birth as a virgin, after giving birth she still remained a virgin.”

¹⁸ Pr. prof. dr. Isidor Todoran, *Teologia Dogmatică*, manual pentru Seminariile teologice, EIBMBOR, București, 1991, p. 297.

¹⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos...*, p. 161.

²⁰ *The Office of Holy Oil...*, Now and ever..., To the Theotokos (Ode I, V and IX).

²¹ The prayer „Truly you are worthy” (*Ἀξίον ἐστίν*).

²² *be Office of Holy Oil...*, Stikhera, Theotokion: „O most-pure Palace of the King, O greatly-extolled One, purify my mind defiled by every sin, I entreat thee, and make it a fair abode of the Most-divine Trinity, that being saved, I, thine unprofitable servant, may magnify thy power and boundless mercy”.

world. (...) Therefore, *Panagia Theotokos*, the Most Holy Mother of God, is *figura ecclesiae* (icon of the Church)²³. The Icon of the Holy Virgin from above the altar shows that the Son of God rests in the humanity of the Holy Virgin Mary. Therefore, only when the humanity receives the deity to rest in it, this can lead to deification. This is a relationship of mutual interiority. The throne on which Theotokos is sitting, remembering the text of Revelation 21, 1-5, symbolizes the state of communion between God and man. The „Pure palace”, as God’s Mother is called in the Mystery of Holy Unction, is a source of eternal and saving gifts²⁴. Through her intercession the deified life from the humanity of Christ is transmitted within our humanity.

The Most Holy Mother of God is often called in the Orthodox worship „Queen and Lady” and in the Holy Unction service we magnify her as „Theotokos Sovereign Lady”²⁵ and „Most-good Sovereign Lady”²⁶. This shows us that she, by sitting on the right side of the Son of God, draws us to this communion, leading us to perfection. She is our Lady because she was able to become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, receiving the *power* of the Most High, Who shadowed her, and the Son of God, who is born as a man from her (Luke 1, 35). Her power will be manifested later by her miracles, many of them being cures effected during her life and after death. Of course, her power as „Sovereign Lady” is from Christ the Lord, without which the Holy Virgin Mary cannot

²³ † Daniel, Mitropolitul Moldovei și Bucovinei, *Vocația creștină pentru sfințenie, prelegere ținută la data de 26 ianuarie 2002 la Institutul Ecumenic „Sfântul Nicolae din Bari”, Italia*, publicată în Revista „Candela Moldovei”, anul XI (2002), nr. 1-2, p. 3.

²⁴ The Mother of God is the source of spiritual gifts. She is quick helpful in times of drought and therefore the Holy Unction is celebrated in these times of trial.

²⁵ *The Office of Holy Oil...*, Troparion on Theotokos, after the blessing of oil, before reading the Apostle: „O fervent Intercession and impregnable Wall, O Fountain of Mercy, O Refuge of the world, we cry out unto thee: Go before in anticipation, O Theotokos Sovereign Lady, and deliver us from misfortunes, O thou who alone art a speedy Intercessor”.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, Now and ever..., To the Theotokos (Ode V).

be honored. Together with the „Lord and Master of my life”²⁷, the „very kind Sovereign Lady” will intercede for us on the final judgment, arguing that the real power is in love.

The Sacrament of Holy Unction is the richest theological and most important service for sick people in the Orthodox Church, because the healing grace that flows through it springs from the merciful love of the Holy Trinity. It addresses both, to the sick and the healthy people, all those who have no hope apart from God²⁸. Therefore, the Mystery of Holy Unction is called „the mystery of consolation” or „the mystery of cure”²⁹.

Listening without ceasing our prayers, the Mother of God always comes to us as quick helping, „door of compassion”³⁰, „through which the world is shown full of mercy”³¹. More than any other Holy Mystery, the Mystery of Holy Unction is the Mystery of consolation for all the sad, for them the Mother of God remained, with her quality of mediator to Christ, „alone art a speedy Intercessor”³². Therefore she is invoked as „ fervent Intercession”, „impregnable Wall”, „Fountain of Mercy”, „Refuge of the world”³³. She has received

²⁷ Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian: „O Lord and Master of my life, Grant not unto me a spirit of idleness, of discouragement, of lust for power, and of vain speaking. But bestow upon me, Thy servant, the spirit of chastity, of meekness, of patience, and of love. Yea, O Lord and King, grant that I may perceive my own transgressions, and judge not my brother, for blessed art Thou unto ages of ages. Amen”.

²⁸ Mediator to God, the Theotokos is the only hope for many, as the Prayer of Paul the Monk (The Supplicatory Prayer to the Most Holy Theotokos) in the Great Compline says: „(...) who art the only hope of the hopeless, and the helper of the struggling, the ever-ready protection of them that hasten unto thee, and the refuge of all Christians. (...) entreat thy Son and our Master and Lord that He may be pleased to open for me the bowels of His loving kindness and graciousness to mankind. (...) And be thou ever present unto me as merciful, compassionate and well disposed (...)”.

²⁹ Arhim. Ioanichie Bălan, *Puterea Sfântului Maslu*, Editura Mitropoliei Moldovei și Bucovinei, Iași, 1993, p. 3.

³⁰ The humility hymn to the Theotokos.

³¹ *The Office of Holy Oil...*, Now and ever... (Ode VI).

³² *Ibidem*, Troparion on Theotokos, after the blessing of oil, before reading the Apostle.

³³ *Ibidem*. A similar Kondakion we meet in The Third Hour.

from Christ the Lord the power to unravel, by „the consolation of prayers”, the suffering of the sick people³⁴. The Mother of God has the power to make forgiving „the One God, who with his mercy and compassion heals all the passions of souls and the crushing of bodies”³⁵, making us partakers of „unfathomable Abyss of Goodness”³⁶. This is because „the supplication of a mother availeth much to win the Master’s favor”³⁷.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, Now and ever..., To the Theotokos (Ode III and VI). That she „healing” affirms the prayer after dinner too: „Make us worthy of your gifts, O Virgin Theotokos, overlooking our transgressions; give healing through faith to them that accept your blessing, O Immaculate One”. Also by Sanctification of the Water, then the Priest sprinkles the Holy Water in the form of the Cross.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, Ode VII.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, The second Prayer of the Office of Holy Oil. That the Mother of God is praying unceasingly and not diminished shown by The Supplicatory Canon to the Most Holy Theotokos, Ode III: „I am tortured by grievous sicknesses and morbid passions: O Virgin, do thou help me; for I know thee to be an inexhaustible treasury of unfailing healing, O all-blameless one”.

³⁷ „O Virgin Theotokos for the supplication of a mother availeth much to win the Master’s favor”. Cf. Theotokion by The Sixth Hour and Great Compline.