

Holy Oils



There are three kinds of sacred oils, all of which signify the work of the Holy Spirit and symbolize it in that oil "serves to sweeten, to strengthen, to render supple" (Catholic Encyclopedia). The three holy oils are:

- **The Oil of Catechumens** is used in Baptism along with water, in the consecration of churches, in the blessing of Altars, in the ordination of priests. This is pure olive oil.
- **The Oil of the Sick** is used in the anointing of those who are very sick or near death. This again is pure olive oil. Only the formula of blessing distinguishes one from the other.
- **The Holy Chrism** or "Oil of Gladness," which is pure olive oil mixed with a small amount of balm or balsam. It is used in Confirmation, Baptism, in the consecration of a Bishop, and the consecration of various things such as churches, chalices, patens, and bells.

The blessing of oils is performed by the bishop of each diocese on Maundy Thursday ("Holy Thursday") in the diocese's cathedral during a "Chrism Mass." The oils are kept in metal or glass bottles called "chrismatories," "chrismals," or "ampullae."

On Holy Thursday morning, the bishop, joined by the priests of the diocese, gather at the Cathedral to celebrate the Chrism Mass. This Mass manifests the unity of the priests with their bishop. Here the bishop blesses three oils the Oil of Catechumens, the Oil of the Sick and Holy Chrism which will be used in the administration of the sacraments throughout the diocese for the year.

Throughout the Bible, various references indicate the importance of olive oil in daily life. Oil was used in cooking, particularly in the making of bread, that basic food substance for nourishment, as a fuel for lamps and as a healing agent in medicine. Moreover, with oil the Jews anointed the head of a guest as a sign of welcome, beautified one's appearance and prepared a body for burial.

In religious practices, the Jews also used oil to dedicate a memorial stone in honour of God, to consecrate the meeting tent, the ark of the covenant, the table, the lampstand, the altar of incense and the altar of holocausts and to offer sacrifices. The use of oil was clearly a part of the daily life of the people.

Given this heritage, the early Church adopted the use of olive oil for its sacramental rituals. Today the Oil of Catechumens is used in connection with the Sacrament of Baptism. In the current baptismal liturgy, the priest offers the prayer of exorcism and then anoints the person to be baptized saying, "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 forever and ever."

In the Sacrament of Confirmation, the bishop anoints the forehead of the candidate with Chrism saying, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Sacred Chrism is also used in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. In the Ordination rite of a priest, the bishop anoints with Chrism the palms of each new priest. In the Ordination rite of a bishop, the consecrating bishop anoints the head of the new bishop.

Finally, Holy Chrism is used in the dedication ceremony of a church. Here the bishop anoints the altar, pouring Holy Chrism on the middle of the altar and on each of its four corners. After anointing the altar, he anoints the walls of the Church in 12 or 4 places marked by crosses.

On St Patrick's Day March 17th 1972 the then Archbishop of Cardiff, Rev. J. Murphy consecrated St Patrick's Church and during the ceremony 12 crosses were placed on the pillars facing the main altar.