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# Chrismation: A Primer for Catholics

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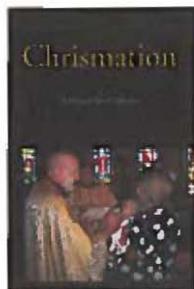
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## *Chrismation: A Primer for Catholics*

By Nicholas E. Denysenko. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014.

Pages, 209. Paper, \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-8146-6273-1 (print);

978-0-8146-6298-4 (e-book).



Bringing his experience of the real life practice of chrismation to his prolific scholarship, cantor and deacon Nicholas Denysenko highlights two principal experiences of the rite as lynchpins of his primer: the anointing of infants as a continuation of the rite of water baptism and the reception of converts into the Orthodox Church. According to

Denysenko, these two experiences of chrismation best embody the true meaning of Christian belonging and thus serve as a thread to understanding the rite in all its multiple manifestations in East and West. One comes away from a careful reading with a fresh appreciation for chrismation both in churches of oriental rite traditions and for confirmation in Roman Catholicism, together with innovative suggestions for giving new life to both. Solid documentary and explanatory footnotes and frequent parenthetical definition of unfamiliar terms support the reader throughout.

The book, like chrismation itself in the author's perspective, is all about a theology of belonging. That insight makes for a fulfilling read and, with its thoroughly developed analysis of chrismation in the life of the church, renders the book a must-read for everyone responsible for the education, formation, and celebration of the mystery of Christian initiation. While the book is indeed a "primer for Catholics," that subtitle should not limit its audience. Many Orthodox and, indeed, Christians of differing liturgical traditions will find that *Chrismation* opens new doors to understanding Christian initiation in all its aspects.

The very organization of the book illustrates Denysenko's command of sound liturgical theology. Following a lengthy introduction on background, perspective, outline, and method, he unpacks chrismation's liturgical story, the eucharistic context, and the euchology and rituals of the consecration of chrism on Holy Thursday and its place in the post-baptismal rites of anointing,

both in Christian initiation (chap. 1) and in the reception of converts to Orthodoxy (chap. 2). In both of these thoroughly documented and skillfully argued chapters he demonstrates how the ritual context of chrismation (Eucharist/consecration) embodies a theology of holiness in community with the Blessed Trinity and fellow baptized faithful. Both chapters are alive with the voices of pastoral experience, the author's own and those of Orthodox faithful—a welcome thread running throughout the work.

Chapter 3 turns to the voices of leading Orthodox theologians, both classic and contemporary. Here too the full liturgical theological context, from consecration through anointing to Eucharist, including in particular God's initiative in the sacraments and their effects, remains the focus. With clarity and transparency Denysenko presents what otherwise might have been a tedious theoretical review of scholarship to one not familiar with Orthodox identity formation and sacramental theology. As illustration, his "dialogue" with Alexander Schmemmann comes full circle: from a collegial critique to duly deserved tribute as principal inspiration for the author's understanding of chrismation in relation to Christian identity of "service in, to, and for the life of the world." He successfully relates the liturgical theology of chapters 1 and 2 to the tapestry of Orthodox theology of chapter 3, closing the chapter with a proposal for new models of identity formation.

"Chrismation and Catholic Confirmation" (chap. 4) will surely be a favorite for both Catholics and Orthodox who have been following the century-long discussion about confirmation as a separate Catholic sacrament and its evolution in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As in chapter 2 on Orthodoxy, here too Denysenko engages in dialogue with the contributions of well-known scholars of Catholic confirmation, extending the insights of Paul Turner, Max Johnson, Frank Quinn, Dominic Serra, and others in search of a way to restore confirmation to its native home (as in Orthodoxy) while honoring the pastoral history of a separated confirmation. Drawing on this thorough examination of liturgical history and theology, including the place of confirmation in Christian initiation, the nature of the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the perennial question about the age for reception, he offers a practical proposal to reconfigure confirmation "by adding a blessing of oil at the Chrism Mass designated for a

solemn anointing of adolescents.” In doing so, he seeks to honor both the liturgical and the pastoral/catechetical realities of confirmation. Yet, one wonders whether the proposal adequately takes into account the possibility that the proposal could backfire. Might a new solemn anointing of adolescents emphasize even more what makes the separated sacrament appealing, possibly increasing the isolation of its initiatory meaning? Such are the questions the author raises as he invites Orthodoxy and Catholicism into a fruitful “ecumenical gift exchange” around the mystery of the anointing with chrism today.

Just as Denysenko set the stage with substance in the introduction, in a lengthy conclusion he summarizes the book’s main contributions, suggests areas needing further study, offers pastoral and ecumenical recommendations for the celebration of chrismation, and, finally, reflects again on anointing with chrism as gift of the Holy Spirit enabling “the twofold covenantal belonging to the communities of the Triune God and his people” (p. 202).

Throughout the work Denysenko marshals his scholarly heritage in a respectful and challenging manner, taking the reader beyond established scholarship. In the spirit of ecumenical action signaled by recent popes and patriarchs, this masterful contribution to mutual understanding of the sacrament among Catholics and Orthodox, East and West, may have the greatest potential to seal a final reunion and heal the wounds of division. Conceived in the trenches of pastoral ministry and born of productive research, *Chrismation* succeeds wonderfully at its stated goal “to unveil the mystery of chrismation and reveal it as a powerful sacrament of belonging capacitating the Christian to assume a holy identity in Christ in service in, to, and for the life of the world” (p. 202). Few are better equipped to help us understand this mystery than Nicholas Denysenko.

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