



34. What Are The Holy Oils For?

Olive oil, as we in this country have come to realise, is a product with many uses. The Christian Church had its origins in a part of the world where the olive is commonly cultivated, and the Christians from early times used olive oil symbolically in their worship.

Olive oil can be used medically, to soothe; in the Roman bath, it was used as part of the cleansing process; and, mixed with herbs, it could impart fragrance. So the Church used oil in the anointing of the sick; in the symbolic purification of those about to be baptised; and in the 'sealing' of those baptised in the Christian faith.

The custom in the Western Church is for oils to be used liturgically to be blessed by a Bishop. This was decided as early as the Council of Carthage, AD 390. In this Diocese, a Eucharist for the Blessing of the Oils takes place at St Albans Abbey on the morning of Maundy Thursday each year, at which the Bishop presides. All Clergy, Readers and other lay Ministers are required to attend and renew their commitment to ministry.

The three different oils are blessed by the Bishop: the first, 'Infirmans', for the anointing of the sick; the second, Oil of Baptism, sometimes called 'of Catechumens' or even 'of Exorcism' is used at Baptism. The third oil, 'Chrism' is a mixture of oil and balsam, and was originally used in the final part of the Baptism service, so now at Confirmation.

At the Service in the Abbey, each church where oils are used brings its own set of containers, which are filled from the oils blessed by the Bishop. At St Mary's, the oils are kept locked in the Aumbry in the Lady Chapel, with the Reserved Sacrament, when not being used.