

Protection of Children against Violence: Liturgies of Anointing

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Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women
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The world in which we live includes much love and affection, but also, sadly, much hatred and violence. This violence may touch children in a variety of ways. They may be personally and directly abused or threatened – whether physically, verbally or emotionally. They may see violence in their own homes, schools and neighborhoods, or they may learn about violence and its consequences on television.

Occasions may therefore arise when caregivers – parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers and others – may wish to express their love for children and invoke the protecting love of God in prayer and ritual. Examples of such liturgies are offered here.

Verbally, the prayer for protection tells us that God does not desire violence against children, that violence is bad and that children are not to be blamed for violence against them. It also expresses the love of adults toward children in their care, invites them to protect children against violence as best they can, and urges them to help build a better world. It says that God loves children and it invokes God's protection upon them.

Nonverbally, anointing involves gentle touching – a model for all human behavior, as opposed to abuse and violence. The use of perfumed oil recognizes that children have the dignity and worth associated with royalty, prophets and priests – persons who receive anointing in the bible. Perfumed oil may be thought of as a cosmetic, but here its use affirms that children are always beautiful; the oil does not make them so.

This liturgy of anointing for protection of children against violence was inspired by the sections of the Roman Catholic Rite of Baptism for Children that are called "Prayer of Exorcism" and "Anointing before Baptism." The prayers of exorcism state that children inherit the fragility of the human condition and that Jesus Christ delivers, frees and strengthens. It asks God to dwell in the children and watch over them. The anointing is for strength, based on the ministry of Jesus Christ. I have simply changed the focus to see children not as sinners but as persons who are or may be sinned against.

The prayer for protection is one of blessing, lament, thanksgiving, remembrance and petition. It begins by blessing God for being strong, reliable, caring and motherly. It then moves to lament for instances of violence related in scripture – and for all violence and abuse. God is then thanked for raising up adults who protect children against violence. It speaks of anointing and its significance and finally, it asks God to protect children. The action of anointing with perfumed oil follows.

This central prayer-action may be preceded by a prayer of thanksgiving over the perfumed oil that is used.

When appropriate, participants may be reminded of baptism through a blessing over light and the lighting of a candle, and by thanksgiving over water and sprinkling with water or touching it.

Proclaiming and responding to God's word is always appropriate. This may be done simply through the biblical stories that are embedded in the prayer for protection. Formal scripture readings may include those referred to in this prayer; references are given below.

These resources may be used in several ways.

- A A simple ritual may be appropriate for use in homes or other informal circumstances. Only a few persons may be present and one or a small number of children are the focus of the ritual. The prayer for protection is said and the child or children are anointed.
- B A complete, separate liturgy may be celebrated in a church or other suitable place, and with a sizable assembly. One, a few or a number of children may be anointed.
- C The prayer for protection and anointing with perfumed oil may be celebrated within the context of a eucharistic liturgy or a liturgy of the word already planned.

These liturgies are intended to be models and resources, and need to be adapted to the circumstances of each particular celebration.

Biblical passages referred to in the prayer for protection:

Violence against Dinah - Genesis 34:1-7, 25b-31

Protection by the Hebrew midwives - Exodus 1:15-2:10

Violence against Jephthah's daughter - Judges 11:29-40

Violence against Tamar - 2 Samuel 13:1-22

Violence against the boys Bethlehem - Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18

Protection by Mary and Joseph - Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Anxious parents search for Jesus - Luke 2:41-52

Jesus and children - Matthew 18:1-5

Matthew 19:13-15

Mark 10:13-16

Luke 9:46-48

Luke 18:15-17

Prayer for Protection of Children against Violence and Anointing with Perfumed Oil: A Simple Ritual:

A caregiver may hold or put their arms around the child.

The caregiver then says the following prayer,
or the prayer may be divided among several leaders.

The following text refers to a single child. A version that refers to several children
may be found on page 9.

O God, our rock and shield:
we bless you for gathering us under the shelter of your wings.

God of life and compassion,
we lament the violent death of the innocent daughter of Jephthah,
the abuse of Dinah and Tamar,
the killing of the innocent boys of Bethlehem,
and the pain of all who have been abused.

God of comfort and strength,
we give you thanks
for the courage of the Hebrew midwives,
who defied Pharaoh and saved the infant Moses;
and for Mary and Joseph,
who protected Jesus by taking him into Egypt
and anxiously searched for him when they were separated.
We thank you for the care and affection of Jesus himself,
who placed children in the very center of his community.

God of holiness and salvation,
may this anointing with perfumed oil
remind us that N. / this child
is created in your own image and likeness,
is a temple of your glory and a dwelling place of your Spirit,
and is called to experience the freedom of your daughters and sons.

Protect him / her / N. and every child from violence and abuse, O God:

show him/her your constant love,
guard her/him against any harm,
watch over every step of her/his journey
and strengthen him/her for life in this threatening world.

We pray in union with your own Child, Jesus Christ, our brother and friend.

Response: Amen.

The child is anointed in silence with perfumed oil,
which was set out beforehand.

The caregiver and others may wish also to kiss or hug the child.

Protection of Children against Violence: A Liturgy of Anointing

Outline of the Rite

Gathering and Greeting
Lighting of Candles and Blessing over Light
Thanksgiving over Water and Sprinkling
Scripture reading(s), Reflection, Prayers of Intercession, Song
Thanksgiving over Perfumed Oil
Prayer for Protection against Violence
and Anointing with Perfumed Oil
Concluding Prayer and Dismissal

Gathering and Greeting

The community gathers.
A song may be sung.

A leader may say:

May the love of God be with us all.

Or

The love of God, the grace of our brother Jesus Christ,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with us all.

Response: Thanks be to God. *Or* Blessed be God forever.

Lighting of Candles and Blessing over Light

One or more candles may be lit.

A leader may gesture toward the candles as he/she says:

Blessed are you, O God,
for you are our light and our salvation;
you are our everlasting light and our glory;
you brighten our darkness;
your word is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.

Response: Thanks be to God.

Thanksgiving over Water and Sprinkling

Water may be poured into a suitable vessel.

A leader may gesture toward the water as he/she says
one or more of the following:

We give you thanks, O God, for the waters of the River Nile.
To them Jochebed entrusted her baby Moses in a reed basket.
From them he was drawn out by Pharaoh's daughter and her Israelite maid.

We bless you for the water and blood
that flowed from Christ's side as he hung upon the cross;
in them he gave birth to his sisters and brothers.

Like rivers flowing from melting glaciers,
let your Holy Spirit come upon us
that we may be protective and caring
and may manifest Christ's love for all.

Response: Thanks be to God.

Water may be sprinkled or touched.

Scripture Reading(s), Reflection, Prayers of Intercession, Song

Thanksgiving over Perfumed Oil

Perfumed oil may be poured into a suitable vessel
or this may be done ahead of time.

A leader may gesture toward the perfumed oil
as he/she says:

Blessed are you, Holy God,
you created spice-bearing plants
and oil-bearing trees
and saw that it was good.

We bless you, O God,
for anointing and sending your Spirit
upon your servant of old and upon Jesus.
We thank you for sending them to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners,
to provide for those who mourn in Zion;
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Bless us now, and this oil,
that in our use of it you may be blessed.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, the Anointed One.

Response: Thanks be to God.

Prayer for Protection against Violence and Anointing with Perfumed Oil

Caregivers may hold the children or put their arms around them.

Caregivers or other leaders say the following prayer,
or the prayer may be divided among several leaders.

O God, our rock and shield:
we bless you for gathering us under the shelter of your wings.

God of life and compassion,
we lament the violent death of the innocent daughter of Jephthah,
the abuse of Dinah and Tamar,
the killing of the innocent boys of Bethlehem,
and the pain of all who have been abused.

God of comfort and strength,
we give you thanks for the courage of the Hebrew midwives,
who defied Pharaoh and saved infant Moses;
and for Mary and Joseph,
who protected Jesus by taking him into Egypt
and anxiously searched for him when they were separated.
We thank you for the care and affection of Jesus himself,
who placed children in the very center of his community.

God of holiness and salvation,
may this anointing with perfumed oil
remind us that N. and N. / these children
are created in your own image and likeness,
made temples of your glory and dwelling places of your Spirit
and called to experience the freedom of your daughters and sons.

Protect N. and N. / these and all children from violence and abuse,
show them your constant love,
guard them against any harm,
watch over every step of their journey,
and strengthen them for life in this threatening world.

We pray in union with your own Child, Jesus Christ, our brother and friend.

Response: Amen.

Anointing takes place in silence.

Concluding Prayer and Dismissal

A leader:

God of all goodness,
we hope in you.

Inspire us to touch others with gentleness and love
and empower us to build a world that no longer knows abuse and violence.

We pray in Jesus' name.

Response: Amen.

Go now in peace.

Response: Thanks be to God.

A song may be sung.

**Prayer for Protection of Children against Violence
and Anointing with Perfumed Oil
Within a Eucharistic Liturgy or Liturgy of the Word**

(i) The Gathering and Greeting of the liturgy above are omitted, as are the Concluding Prayer and Dismissal

(ii) The Blessing over Light and/or Thanksgiving over Water may be omitted or may be incorporated into the Introductory Rites of the eucharist or liturgy of the word.

(iii) The Scripture Reading(s), Reflection and Intercessions are those of the eucharistic liturgy or liturgy of the word.

(iv) The Thanksgiving over Perfumed Oil and Prayer for Protection of Children against Violence plus Anointing may follow the intercessions of the eucharist or liturgy of the word.

Either the form for one child (pp. 4-5) or several children (p 9) is used, as appropriate.