

OIL, THE SACRED ELEMENT JOINING MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

By Elia Fiorillo, the President of Unasco

Oil is food, but also considered source of life and a sort of soothing balsam. And over all, symbol of peace. The olive oil is an up-to-date symbol for the monotheistic religions of the Mediterranean; it unifies the Christians, to Jews and Muslims. This came out from the meeting “oil and the sacred” organized by Enoteca Italiana, inside the travelling exhibition “oil season” to underline, the president Claudio Galletti said-how a product can join different religions and become, on its turn, a way of dialogue. As for the Hebraism, the bond between oil and food is really important as Oreste Bisazza Terracini – the President of the Jewish Jurists and Governor of Jerusalem University – underlined at the meeting at Serre Rapolano; in fact in the Bible the olive-tree is quoted one hundred times and the oil is quoted one hundred and forty times; besides these elements appear also in Noah’s pact. On Saturdays, oil is brought into the houses by the women that make bread and they light up two oil-lamps on the table. A tradition that 15 million people follow to celebrate- Terracini underlined- the history, full of miracles, of the elected people. All the three religions show a royal, prophetic and priestly use of olive oil. But only the Catholics bring home an olive-branch on Palm Sunday, and identification with the lord’s oil even if in a psalm- the governor of the University of Jerusalem pointed out-there is an eschatological saviour, the Christos where the spirit of god sets, according to Hebraism.

“Even the Christians-said the monk Celso Bidin from Monte Oliveto Maggiore Abbey- worship, as the Jews, the olive. The olive oil, according to the Christian religion, is with us from the baptism to the extreme unction and in all the sacraments. A ritual that exists also in the orthodox religions of Northern Europe, for example, even if they do not have olive trees on their land. Even the protestants from Finland- the monk from Siena proud of the 4500 olive-trees commented-are baptized with oil”. According to the Islamic religion, instead,- as the architect of the Islamic Community (Coreis) David Napolitano witnessed-“ when they build mosques they have to express the vertical

dimension of the prayer putting an oil –lamp at the centre of the dome. The oil represents the insight of the soul that lights up with the prayer to God. And this light leads the believers to the right orthodoxy. But this light- the architect Napolitano explains- is protected with a crystal that is put like a veil because full knowledge can't be direct. It can't be either eastern or western, because prayer is to be found in the soul".

OIL THROUGH BLESSING AND CONSECRATION

The blessing and consecration are often linked to the natural element: oil. Blessed olive oil is used to bless sick people. That moment has not only the meaning of a simple ointment. This oil represents the induction of a spiritual and physical strength. The Orthodox Church uses this sacred oil to bless the invalids, whose aim is a spiritual and physical healing. This sacrament can be administered in the church or at home. In the Greek typikon, this sacrament is administered to the believers on Holy Wednesday, when they are anointed in some parts of their body.

The Sacred Myron or Chrisman is composed by oil as well. This oil is made every ten years. Though all these years the sacred oil doesn't get old or acid. Only the Patriarchs can produce it, not all the bishops. It has 52 smells and its preparation is started on Palm Sunday. It is ready to be used three days later it is delivered to all the Bishops and Archbishops spreading it afterwards in their churches. The oil is kept in wide containers where it continues boiling. Every day believers pray on it and it is progressively added with other smells. This oil, symbol of strength, will be used to anoint the new altars the church walls in all the cardinal points, to administer confirmation to the new baptises. In Greece the Myron is used to bless the Chalice and the Discos. Once it was also used to bless the Emperor.

THE OLIVE OIL AS PLANT BOUND TO MEDITERRANEAN PEOPLE

The olive tree is certainly a plant strictly bound to the Mediterranean people; in some ways it represents their civilization and their history. The olive tree probably comes from the southern Caucasus region, from where it presumably spread towards Iran and then to Cyprus, Crete and along the coasts of Syria, Anatolia and Egypt.

In 1600 B.C. oil was wide-spread all over Greece. The Romans mainly spread this plant all over Italy, along some of the French coasts and in Spain. The olive tree, an evergreen, is a plant full of symbols and values: fecundity, delight and incorruptibility. The olive oil was used for the athletes fighting in the arenas. I want to underline that Jacob raised an altar from a stone and he poured some oil on it. Saul and David were crowned and blessed with oil. Oil is still used by the Christians today as sacred element to bless sick people, the baptised and ecclesiastical ordination.

THE HISTORY OF THE FREEDOM OF THOUGHT – SOCRATES

I have been kindly allowed by Feltrinelli editor and by the author to anticipate a little passage from the beginning of the first chapter of the book 'The history of the free thought' written by Paolo Villaggio.

Socrates (469 B.C.-399 B.C.). Athens: a sunny morning of 399 B.C.: there were a lot of people on the Acropolis, they were walking and discussing about different themes. There were several groups. Sometimes someone stopped and complained about heat: 'By God! It is really too hot...', drying his forehead with the back of his hand.

One said: 'I have never been so hot, only once in Crete...'

'What happens Democritus?' 'Are you afraid your new Retzina (wine) gets acid?' another asked, sitting on the steps of Parthenon. Democritus laughed: 'you know, Demosthenes, I don't give a damn about wine, wine producers and all the people having a lot of money! You are probably not worried, being a poet of wine! Can I give you an advice? Go on drinking, because the wine you gulp is an extraordinary energy for your creative power and a joy for us!'. A young poet, Mimnermo, who was walking alone, stopped a middle-aged man. He had a nice face and he was walking with some thirty very young boys. Some were almost children. 'Sorry Mr. Socrates, the poet said, I know you. You are very famous here in Athens'. 'Thank you, but you are a bit exaggerated. Instead you are the well-known Mimnermo. I have read all your works, and I must tell you that your ode on death in war is really beautiful: dying for your homeland is certainly

beautiful. But I do not agree, dear young, on this macabre philosophy about death, heroism, death in war...I find it an awful excuse, on the mean merchants' side, to convince the young, who have a whole happy life ready to be spent, to throw it away to get rich together with their accomplices. That means these young would renounce the most precious gift men receive on their birthday: life!

The young poet heard him with some embarrassment. 'Motherland, yes...motherland- Socrates continued- a vague and abstract concept. The word homeland is useful to those who cause war only to defend his commercial interests. I am talking about olive oil producers, of salted –fish- merchants or of scarce wine tasting resin. You see resin costs less but wine is really awful. Yet, they have convinced everybody that this wine is the most suitable for every occasion. These men are all joint together by a deep lack of culture and curiosity, they never read and they are stupid, vulgar and ignorant. And you, dear young, you write a commoving hymn on these beggars' side?' The young around them, that Socrates called disciples, had listened to that sermon with admiration and they clapped their hands. Even Mimnermo joined them: 'you are an extraordinary man, Master...I would like to talk to you'. 'As you like, dear young. We are the peripatetic, we go on walking here, from the Erected to the Parthenon and vice versa. Every day, dear young, even when it rains. I like rain, unless it is too violent. Rain exalts the smells, of the marbles all around, of the land, of the olive trees. Rain is sensual. You can speak with us about everything you are interested in. never sitting... always walking! When you move your brain receives more oxygen and it works better! Socrates looked Mimnermo deep into his eyes 'you have very beautiful eyes- he said – come again!' and he continued walking with his disciples. Some steps onward he turned again and said:' you have also a very beautiful body and I would like to sleep with you!'