

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

“Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”

James 5:14-15

Each sickness is small death, reminder of our frailty and mortality (CCC 1500)

“By the sacred anointing of the sick and prayer of the priests the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that He may raise them up and save them. And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the Passion and death of Christ” (CCC #1499).

Throughout the Scriptures we see God’s concern over the suffering of His people, and His desire that they be healed.

2 Kings 4:18-20, 32 –37

Tobit 11:10 –15

Mark 6:7, 12-13

2 Kings 5:1, 9-14

Matthew 9:18 –31

Acts 3:1 –8

Healing Through Suffering

Strange as it may sound, the Catholic Church has a theology of healing through suffering. In our world today, suffering is looked upon as worthless. But when endured through faith in Christ, suffering conforms us to the image of our Savior.

Isaiah 53:5

1 Peter 4:1

Romans 8:18, 35-39

St. Peter says, “Rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when His glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly.”

Christ gives meaning to our suffering, for through our Baptisms, the Anointing of the Sick, and faith, we share in His cross and resurrection.

Celebration of the Sacrament

Who is to be anointed? Those who are baptized, of the age of reason, and are in danger of death or facing a serious illness. Also, those who are about to undergo major surgery should be anointed, as well as those who have become feeble due to old age.

The sacrament may be repeated if a person’s condition worsens due to the same illness.

The person who is anointed should prepare by making a good Confession if they are aware of any serious sins. After the anointing the person usually receives Holy Communion if they are able. Only a priest or a bishop can celebrate the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. It should be noted that today there are some “charismatic” Catholics who visit the sick and anoint them with blessed oil. If these people are not priests, they are not able to perform the true Sacrament.

Misconceptions

There are various misconceptions about the Anointing of the Sick. The Sacrament used to be called “extreme unction” and people developed the idea that before it could be performed, a person had to be very near death. It is dangerous, however, to wait until a person comes near to death as the priest may not be able to arrive in time. The Anointing of the sick should be administered, if possible, when a person first becomes ill so that the person may make a confession if necessary, and also receive Holy Communion, known as “Viaticum”, which means, with you on the way.

The Anointing of the Sick does not imply that a person is going to die: it is a sacrament of healing. It gives comfort to the sick and increases their faith to help them face their suffering with hope in Jesus Christ. It does not always bring about physical healing, but always prepares the person spiritually to accept their sickness, and if the Lord calls, to face death confidently.

Sacred Oil in the Old Testament

Since Old Testament times, oil has been a symbol of the overflow of the Holy Spirit upon an individual (1 Sam. 10:1-13, 16:12-13), of abundance of joy (Deut. 11:14, Ps. 23:5, 104:14-15, 133:1-2, Isa. 61:3, Heb. 1:9) and a sign of healing, for “it makes radiant with beauty, health and strength” (CCC 1293, Luke 10:34). Athletes in the ancient world made use of oil to limber up and cleanse themselves. Oil symbolizes health and soundness.

Christ the Physician

“The Catholic Church professes and teaches that the Sacred Anointing of the Sick is one of the seven Sacraments of the New Testament, that it was instituted by Christ,” so begins the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Paul VI *Sacram Unctionem Infirmum* on the Sacrament of Anointing.

Sickness can be of pivotal importance in the life of a person. The Catechism says:

“Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him”

CCC 1500-1501

Christ cared profoundly for the well-being of the sick. The healing of the sick was a messianic symbol of the coming of the Messiah, a sign that “God has visited His people” (Luke 7:16). In their suffering, Christ identifies Himself with the sick (“I was sick and you visited Me”, Matt. 25:36) and took special compassion on the sick; the New Testament is replete with examples of Christ’s healings of sick persons.

Though He has genuine concern for the sick, we must understand *two* things about Christ’s healings:

1. The healing of the body is not the ultimate end, but the healing of the soul. As Christ says in the Gospel, “which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”-he then said to the paralytic-“Rise, take up your bed and go home.” And he rose and went home” (Matt. 9:5-7). Sickness of the body always represents the sickness of sin; consequently, the healings of Christ are meant ultimately to heal the soul primarily, and the body secondarily.

2. The healings of Jesus were signs of the coming Kingdom, where there will be a more radical healing, for in the Kingdom of Heaven “God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes: and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:4). The healings of Christ therefore serve as signs of the life to come.

Healing in the New Testament & Church History

This sacrament has gone by various names throughout the history of the Church. It has been called Extreme Unction, Last Rites, Anointing of the Sick, and the Sacrament of the Departing (*sacramentum exeuntium*). However, its origin, like that of all the sacraments, goes back to Christ Himself.

As part of the messianic mission, Christ extends this healing power to His disciples. Healing is prolific in the Gospels: everywhere Christ goes, He is giving sight to the blind, healing the crippled and lame, casting out demons and restoring health to the sick; this sometimes even includes the raising of the dead.

Christ delegates this power to His Apostles as part of His mission, and Mark 6:13 records that “they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” The disciples continued to exercise this power after Christ’s Ascension, and St. James commends its use in James 5:14-15. The Book of Acts makes reference to many healings by the Apostles, but it is uncertain how many (if any) of these were the same as the sacrament.

The Protestants asserted that anointing was not truly a sacrament, but an institution of men. Against them could be cited the testimony of Tertullian (200) Origen (254), Serpaion (360), St. Augustine (410) St. John Cassian (450) and St. Bede (745), all of whom affirmed the institution of this sacrament by Christ Himself.

Form & Matter

The matter of the sacrament is two-fold:

the *remote* matter is the consecrated oil itself,

the *proximate* matter is the act of anointing with the consecrated oil. In the old days, this anointing was done over the head, hands, feet, ears, noses, eyes and various other parts of the body. Now, it is standard to anoint only the head of the sick person, though the unction of other body parts may still be appropriate.

The form of the sacrament is the words “Through this holy anointing may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord Who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.”

Proper Minister

The proper minister of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is a priest or bishop (“the elders of the Church”). By longstanding apostolic tradition going back at least to Pope Innocent I (401- 417) and beyond him to the injunction of Holy Scripture in James 5:14-15, a priest or bishop is the only minister of the sacrament; deacons and lay persons are unable to administer it.

Effects of the Sacrament

The graces given through this sacrament are many. Comfort, peace, courage to face challenges of sickness, to resist temptations to discouragement and despair. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* enumerates four:

1520 *A particular gift of the Holy Spirit.* The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death. This assistance from the Lord by the power of his Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will. Furthermore, "if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."

1521 *Union with the passion of Christ.* By the grace of this sacrament the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion: in a certain way he is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior's redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.

1522 *An ecclesial grace.* The sick who receive this sacrament, "by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ," "contribute to the good of the People of God." By celebrating this sacrament the Church, in the communion of saints, intercedes for the benefit of the sick person, and he, for his part, though the grace of this sacrament, contributes to the sanctification of the Church and to the good of all men for whom the Church suffers and offers herself through Christ to God the Father.

1523 *A preparation for the final journey.* If the sacrament of anointing of the sick is given to all who suffer from serious illness and infirmity, even more rightly is it given to those at the point of departing this life; so it is also called *sacramentum exeuntium* (the sacrament of those departing). The Anointing of the Sick completes our conformity to the death and Resurrection of Christ, just as Baptism began it. It completes the holy anointings that mark the whole Christian life: that of Baptism which sealed the new life in us, and that of Confirmation which strengthened us for the combat of this life. This last anointing fortifies the end of our earthly life like a solid rampart for the final struggles before entering the Father's house

Absolution of Sin

As the Catechism says in paragraph 1520, the sacrament of anointing has from apostolic times included an absolution from sin. This is made clear in the text from James chapter 5: "the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." This absolution consists in a remission of all venial sin and as much of the temporal punishment due to sin as corresponds to the intensity of charity and penance in the recipient.

This forgiveness of sins is actuated by two principles:

1. The will of Christ to prepare His people for death by cleansing their soul and making it fit for heaven.
2. The participation of the recipient in the communion of saints, where the Church Triumphant offers prayers for his soul.

If the recipient is on the verge of death, then the sacrament of anointing is often coupled with the sacrament of penance (last confession) followed by Viaticum (final Holy Communion).

Last Rites – Viaticum

Early in the Church, the practice developed of giving those on the verge of death access to three sacraments to prepare them for their final journey: anointing, confession and Eucharist. All of these in general took the name *Viaticum*, which loosely translated from Latin means “provisions for the journey.” By the Middle Ages, this word came to refer to the Eucharist explicitly and has since been translated as “food for the journey.”

This food, received at the moment of passing over to the Father, is of extreme significance. “It is the seed of eternal life and the power of resurrection,” as the Catechism says (CCC 1524). The soul, ready to be received by God through the final sacraments, receives the Body of Christ for the final time on this earth in the form of Viaticum, trusting in the words of Christ: “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:54).

The normal minister of Viaticum is a priest, though in necessity a deacon or even layperson is permitted to administer it to the dying.

Exorcism

In the context of anointing, it is fit to discuss the Church’s practice of exorcism. Exorcisms occur within many sacraments of the Church: baptism, confirmation and anointing all have exorcisms associated with them. Many objects are exorcised as well, such as blessed salt, holy oils, holy water, and so on. Exorcism can also be performed on its own as a unique rite, if necessary.

Exorcism refers to two things:

first, the act of driving out, or warding off, demons, or evil spirits, from persons, places, or things, which are believed to be possessed or infested by them, or are liable to become victims or instruments of their malice;

second, the means employed for this purpose, especially the solemn and authoritative adjuration of the demon, in the name of God, or any of the higher power in which he is subject.

Demonic possession is a reality, of which the authority of Christ Himself bears witness. (Matt. 8:16, 15:22; Mark 1:24, 3:22, 9:24; Luke 8:28, 11:15-19, 13:32) Furthermore, the belief which would assert that ancient men believed in demonic possession because they did not understand genetic or mental disabilities must be rejected. See, for example, Luke 13:32, where Jesus distinguishes between performing cures and expelling demons.

As Christ gave authority to His Apostles to forgive sins and to heal in His name, so He delegated to them the authority to exorcise demons. But the efficacy of this delegated power was conditional, as we see from the fact that the Apostles themselves were not always successful in their exorcisms; the success of an exorcism depends on the same criteria as the efficacy of prayer. Nevertheless, some degree success was promised (Mark 16:17; Acts 16:18; 19:12), and, no doubt, the other Apostles and disciples, made use of regularly, as occasion arose, of their exorcising power, and the Church has continued to do so uninterruptedly to the present day.

Exorcism may be carried out in many ways: breathing on the possessed, a sign of the cross, laying on of hands, sprinkling with Holy Water, the presentation of a crucifix, etc. Common to all these methods is

the simple and authoritative adjuration of the demon in the name of Christ. No magical or superstitious means ought to ever be employed.

Though the theology surrounding exorcism is not well developed in the Church (for it deals with the angelic realm, something veiled in mystery), a few things are certain:

- Demonic possession is a reality, distinct from mental or physical illness (though sometimes causing these effects). Demonic “haunting” of places and objects is also possible.
- While we are most familiar with stories of complete possession, there are in fact degrees of demonic activity in a person (partial possession, obsession and oppression). For more, see *An Exorcist Tells His Story* by Gabriel Amorth.
- It seems that a demon could not possess a person who has the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, for the Holy Spirit and a demon could not coexist. Therefore, it would seem that persons in a state of grace are immune from demonic possession in the full sense. Though there is no dogma on this, full possession seems to involve a willing assent by the person possessed, though this point is contested by some theologians.
- The competent Church authorities engage in rigorous medical and psychological testing to determine if there are any other possible explanation for the unusual behavior before an exorcism is scheduled.
- The Church, following Christ, has always made use of rites of exorcism. Every diocese to this day has at least one exorcist on staff and exorcisms are still occurring in modern times.

For Further Reading: Ps. 133; Matt. 9:1-8, 25:31-46; Mark 6:13; Acts 16:18; 19:12; Jas. 5:14-15; Rev. 21:1-4; Pope Paul VI, *Sacram Unctionem Infirmorum* (1972); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1500-1532; Fr. Peter Stravinskis, *Understanding the Sacraments*; Gabriel Amorth, *An Exorcist Tells His Story*; Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil*; Catholic Encyclopedia article “Extreme Unction”, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05716a.htm>;

GLOSSARY TERMS

Anointing

The use of sacred oil, the oil of catechumens, chrism, or the oil of the sick in the celebration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, anointing of the sick, and holy orders; symbol of the Holy Spirit; the Hebrew term Messiah (in the Greek, Christos) means “anointed one,” referring to Christ.

Preternatural gifts

The gifts God added to human nature when he created our first parents: immortality, impassibility (i.e., freedom from suffering), integrity, and infused knowledge. They were added to man’s nature; thus they are called preternatural (from the Latin *praeter naturam*, meaning beside or in addition to nature). These gifts were lost in the Fall, but will be restored to us in the next life.

Viaticum

The Latin phrase *via tecum* means “with you on the way”; the final reception of Holy Communion prior to one’s death, usually as part of the celebration of the sacrament of anointing.

Chrism Mass

Earlier in the day, on Holy Thursday (or on some day earlier in that week), the bishop of a diocese and his priests gather at the cathedral to celebrate this Mass, which manifests the unity of the priests with their bishop. In the Chrism Mass, the bishop blesses three holy oils

The oil of chrism, or holy chrism, is a fragrant oil used for sacramental anointing that will signify the gift of the Holy Spirit coming to a person in baptism and in confirmation.

The oil of the sick is a pure oil used in the sacramental anointing of the sick.

The oil of catechumens is for converts to the Faith and is also used in baptism.

Group Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to call Christ our “great physician”?
2. How does the Church fulfill the command of Christ to “heal the sick”?
3. Discuss the four major effects of the anointing of the sick, highlighting those aspects of this sacrament that are new to your group.
4. How does the anointing of the sick describe the whole sacramental life?
5. How can this sacrament help you to better understand suffering in light of Christ’s work on the cross?

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS

Name: _____

From the Catechism Nos. 1499–1519

1. Christ grants his apostles a “share in his ministry of _____ and _____.”

2. What does St. James exhort the early Christians to do when they are ill?

3. T or F The sacrament of anointing can only be administered when death is imminent.

4. Who are the proper ministers of the anointing of the sick? _____ and _____.

5. What are the three essential elements to the celebration of the sacrament of anointing?

From the Catechism Nos. 1520–1532

6. What are the effects of the sacrament of anointing?

7. The Catechism refers to viaticum as the “_____ of _____.”

8. Just as baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist are the sacraments of initiation to the Christian life, the sacraments of reconciliation, anointing of the sick, and the Eucharist (as viaticum) form the “sacraments that prepare us for our _____ .”

9. What can the “special grace” of anointing of the sick result in?
