

# Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

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## Jesus the Healer

Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan challenges us to take care of those in our midst who are suffering from illness or injury. The traveler from Samaria is moved with compassion when he encounters a man lying on the side of the road who had been attacked and left for dead. The Samaritan pours oil and wine over the man's wounds and bandages them. Then he takes the man to an inn and cares for him. Surely this was an inconvenience since it interrupted the Samaritan's travels.

When you consider that people from Samaria were despised by Jews and that the man on the side of the road may well have been a Jew, the Samaritan's actions are all the more significant. The parable makes clear that we are to think of the ill or suffering stranger as a neighbor even if that person may think little of us.

Through his words and actions, Jesus expresses love and concern for the sick and suffering. The Gospels tell many stories of Jesus healing people. He cured Peter's mother-in-law of a fever (See Matthew 8:14-15), healed a centurion's paralyzed servant in Capernaum (See Matthew 8: 5-13), cleansed a leper (See Matthew 8:1-3), cured a woman who had suffered for many years from hemorrhages (See Luke 8:43-48), restored the life of Jairus' twelve year old daughter (See Luke 8:49-56), healed a woman who was crippled (See Luke 13: 11-13), and opened the eyes of a man blind since birth (See John 9:1-12). This list refers to but a small sampling of Jesus' many healing acts.

Jesus encouraged his followers to participate in his ministry of caring for the sick and suffering. The Gospel according to Matthew's parable about the last judgment includes the following criterion for attaining eternal life: "I was sick and you took care of me" (See Matthew 25:36).

A passage from the first letter of James attests to the importance placed on the care of the sick in the early Church: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven" (James 5: 14-15).

The Church today continues Jesus' ministry by caring for the ill and celebrating the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick with them.

To understand the purpose of this work and ministry it is important to begin with the recognition that Jesus didn't heal everyone who was sick. Even those whom he did heal

eventually died. Jesus' ministry was not primarily focused on physical healing and prolonging life indefinitely and neither is the Church's ministry today. By God's design earthly life is fleeting. No matter how healthy we are we cannot escape the aging process and its culmination in death.

Understanding the ultimate reality of death helps us to put Jesus' healing and the Anointing of the Sick in a clearer context. Jesus' healings were part of his mission to announce and usher in the kingdom of God. They signify that God's kingdom is at hand. The physical healing of the sick is not an end in itself.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, Jesus' healings "announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death . . . . By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion" (CCC 1505).

Jesus' Paschal mystery – his passage from life through suffering and death to new life – demonstrates that suffering has redemptive meaning and value. Neither sickness, nor suffering, nor death should be viewed as punishments. These are not signs that God has turned away from us. These realities of human existence join us to Christ's Paschal mystery. They are not an end just as Jesus' suffering and death were not.

We are challenged to view illness and injury in this light and to recognize that the Church's care of the sick, which includes the celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing, is not carried out for the sake of physical health in this world. It is carried out for the spiritual well-being of the entire Church.

## From Extreme Unction to Anointing of the Sick

A little history helps to illumine the Church's practice of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick today. This is because the Second Vatican Council, held from 1962-1965, ushered in a change in the way Catholics understand the sacrament.

Since the Middle Ages until Vatican II, the Anointing of the Sick had been called Extreme Unction. As the name implies (the Latin *extremus* means "the end"), one celebrated this sacrament on one's deathbed. Another name that emerged in popular usage is "Last Rites."

This timing developed in tandem with the practice of delaying the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation until just before death. Reconciliation had come to be regarded as an unrepeatable sacrament, which led to its deathbed setting. Putting it off until the end of life was the best way to assure that one would not commit new sins before dying. Shortly before death, individuals would celebrate Reconciliation and then be anointed. As a result, sacramental anointing took on a penitential tone and came to be viewed as private, once-in-a-lifetime sacrament.

Vatican II and the publication of a new ritual text that guides the Church's pastoral care, entitled "The Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum" (PCS), brought about significant changes in the practice of anointing during the last several decades. As the name of the ritual text suggests, the Sacrament of Anointing takes place in the context of the Church's overall ministry of caring for the sick.

The Sacrament of Anointing is no longer restricted to people in imminent danger of death and the previous connection to penance is intentionally loosened now. If a sick person desires the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation it is preferable for this to take place at a separate time in advance of the anointing. (See PCS 101). The name "Extreme Unction" has fallen out of use and been replaced by "Anointing of the Sick."

Another change in ritual and process is a renewed emphasis on the role of the community. Private celebrations still occur when necessary but this is not the ideal. Though the sacrament may be celebrated in a home, medical facility, or church, and within Mass or outside Mass, the preferred way to celebrate is with family and community present.

The most appropriate time for individuals to celebrate the Anointing of the Sick is whenever they become seriously ill. Those dealing with mental illness and the elderly who are coping with increasing frailty may also be anointed. The Church strongly encourages everyone in these situations to ask for the sacrament. There is no reason to wait until the time when the illness becomes grave and death is imminent.

Anointing may be repeated if an individual's situation becomes more serious, if a person gets well and then sick again, or in the case of someone with a chronic condition such as old age, at times when he or she would benefit spiritually from it.

## Communal Anointing

Many parishes today regularly celebrate communal anointings within Mass. An interesting phenomenon is occurring in some of these places. If the presider issues a general invitation for any who are in need of healing to come forward to celebrate the sacrament, guess what happens? The seemingly healthy join the seriously ill in large numbers and flock to the priest for the laying on of the hands and anointing. Perhaps you have witnessed this or even participated in it.

This practice does not completely fulfill the intent of the rite, which says the sacrament is for the seriously ill and cautions against anointing people indiscriminately. This phenomena, however, says something powerful about people's sense that they need healing. Perhaps those who respond to the invitation have a need for spiritual healing that is experienced in a physical way, affecting their energy and limiting their zest for life, for example. Or perhaps they sense that the sacrament will bring the sort of healing they need because they believe—correctly—

the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is primarily focused on spiritual healing rather than physical healing.

Theologian Kathleen Hughes, in her book *Saying Amen*, discusses this phenomenon and points out that Catholics may be overlooking the healing aspects of Eucharist and Reconciliation. She notes the decline in participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation in recent years, and comments that some who are drawn to Anointing are really candidates for Reconciliation. She also highlights the healing aspect of Eucharist: “The eucharist has been called the primary sacrament of healing—soul healing. We actually make that claim every time we celebrate the eucharist” . . . when. . . “we say, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed’” (Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 157-158).

## The Mission of the Sick

Serious illness and injury can affect almost every aspect of life. The experience of having limitations and being unable to perform one’s regular activities as well as the uncertainty about one’s future can be very disruptive. One’s mind and spirit are affected right along with the body. For some, the experience gives rise to despair. They glimpse death and are afraid of what is to come. Some turn away from God, while others intensify their search for God. Some have a renewed awareness of the preciousness of life and are able to discern what matters most in life. Some remain full of hope even in the face of certain death and hold firm to their faith in God’s mercy and love.

The celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing is one of the significant ways the Church tries to bring healing to the people in these various situations.

The shift away from the deathbed as the primary setting for anointing has led to a renewed understanding of the role sick people play in carrying out the mission of the Church. The sick are not simply the recipients of pastoral care or the objects of the Church’s ministry. Those who are sick through their illness, have an important role to play in the continuation of Jesus’ ministry in the world. They serve to remind us of “the essential or higher things” and they open our eyes to the reality that our “mortal life must be redeemed through the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection” (*PCS*, 3). They “contribute to the welfare of the people of God” when they “associate themselves willingly with the passion and death of Christ” (*PCS*, 5). As Paul said in his letter to the Romans “we suffer with [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:17).

Anointing is not meant to function as a panacea to sickness, discomfort, and suffering. It doesn’t mean we won’t suffer, and we certainly won’t escape death. It does mean that even in an impaired state we are part of Christ’s mission on earth. Through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick we embrace the fundamental Christian belief that if we die with Jesus we will rise to new life with him.

The Church's care of the sick has many facets beyond the celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing. It involves visiting the sick, praying for them, comforting them, showing them love, and nourishing them with Eucharist even when they are unable to attend Mass. It also means tending to the needs of the family and friends who are caring for them. When we carry out these ministries the intent is to bring about spiritual growth so that hope supplants any despair, and trust in God's love overpowers anxiety and worry. The intent is also to recognize the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the sick and to help them to see it also.

None of this is meant to suggest that sick people shouldn't do whatever they can to overcome illness and restore their physical health. "We should fight strenuously against all sickness and carefully seek the blessings of good health, so that we may fulfill our role in human society and in the Church" (PCS, 3). Doctors and all who care for the sick should "consider it their duty to use all the means which in their judgment may help the sick, both physically and spiritually. In so doing, they are fulfilling the command of Christ to visit the sick" (PCS, 4).

## Central Symbolic Actions

The gathering of the community and the proclamation of the Word are central symbolic actions in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, just as they are in all the other sacraments. Beyond these two, there are three actions at the heart of the Sacrament of Anointing: the prayer of faith, the laying on of hands, and the anointing itself.

### The Prayer of Faith

The community's prayer of faith can be understood in a general and particular way. In general, the entire celebration of the sacrament is the prayer of faith. The people – healthy and sick – join together in prayer to ask God for comfort, healing, and spiritual strengthening for the sick.

In particular, there are certain prayers that stand out in importance. The first is the prayer over the oil that will be used for the anointing. Two scenarios are possible here. If the oil was blessed by the bishop during Holy Week, as is the custom, then the presider says a prayer of thanksgiving over the oil. If it was not previously blessed, then the presider blesses it. In the latter situation, the priest may use the following words:

God of all consolation,  
You chose and sent your Son to heal the world.  
Graciously listen to our prayer of faith:  
Send the power of your Holy Spirit, the Consoler,  
into this precious oil, this soothing ointment,  
this rich gift, this fruit of the earth.  
Bless this oil and sanctify it for our use.  
Make this oil a remedy for all who are anointed with it;  
heal them in body, in soul, and in spirit,

and deliver them from every affliction.  
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.  
Amen.  
(PCS, 123).

The blessing is integral to the sacrament even when it takes place ahead of time. Regardless of the setting and the precise formulation, the blessing includes a special prayer request called an *epiclesis*. The prayer asks that God send the Holy Spirit into the oil so that those anointed with it will experience healing.

Another prayer central to the sacrament is the litany the community prays. The priest offers a prayer to which the community responds, "Lord, have mercy." Here are a few examples of the prayers:

- Bless N. and N. and fill them with new hope and strength.
- Sustain all the sick with your power.
- Give life and health to our brothers and sisters on whom we lay our hands in your name (PCS, 138).

## The Laying on of Hands

After the litany the priest lays hands on the head of each sick person in silence. This biblical gesture is a calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the sick to give them strength and healing grace. It evokes images of the many stories in the New Testament in which Jesus healed through the power of touch. Think, for example, of Jesus touching the eyes of the two blind men whose vision he restored (See Matthew 9:27-31) and the woman in the crowd who reached out and touched Jesus and was immediately healed (See Luke 8:43-48).

## The Anointing with Olive Oil

As the blessing prayer states, the oil is "precious" and a "rich gift," even before it is blessed. In ancient times, olive oil was considered a necessity of life. Possessing it, especially in ample quantity, was a sign of God's abundant love. In liturgy today, our use of the oil signifies the inspiring and powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. The rite emphasizes the need for "a generous use of oil so that it will be seen and felt by the sick person as a sign of the Spirit's healing and strengthening presence" (PCS, 107).

In the sacrament, the priest anoints the sick on the forehead saying: "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit." The sick respond: "Amen." Then the priest anoints the hands saying, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." Again the sick respond, "Amen." (PCS, 124) When the sick

say “Amen” after being anointed they offer their assent to what the Church intends by celebrating the sacrament. They don’t participate filled with false hope born out the mistaken idea that the sacrament is intended to bring about physical healing. With “Amen” they open themselves to the power of the Holy Spirit and they surrender to God’s will for them.

The commitment they make is really an affirmation of their Christian identity and a recommitment to participate in Christ’s Paschal mystery. The anointing is meant to assure the sick person and the whole community that God is with us and will enable us to pass through suffering and sickness to new life, just as Jesus did.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the sacramental life of the Church brings us into closer intimacy and communion with God and the whole body of Christ. The Anointing of the Sick in particular gives the sick strength to face their struggles and to continue to live faithfully, confident in God’s loving presence. The overall care of the sick as well as the celebration of the sacrament is the concern of the whole community.

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