

# THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Illness and suffering have always been among the most serious problems confronted in human life. During illnesses, especially serious ones, we experience our powerlessness, limitations and a foretaste of the reality of death. There are also some very real spiritual dangers that sickness and suffering can produce. Self absorption, anguish, bitterness and even despair are temptations which can beset those weighed down with illness. For all these reasons, the Church, in imitation of Jesus himself, has always had a great concern to reach out to those who are sick and those who are suffering. Just as Christ once stretched out his hands to heal, so too he continues to do this through his mystical body the Church. We celebrate this reality in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. *By the sacred anointing of the sick and the 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.* (Catechism # 1499). We will consider each aspect of this description of the anointing of the sick. First, let us consider the outward sign of the sacrament and then its biblical origins.

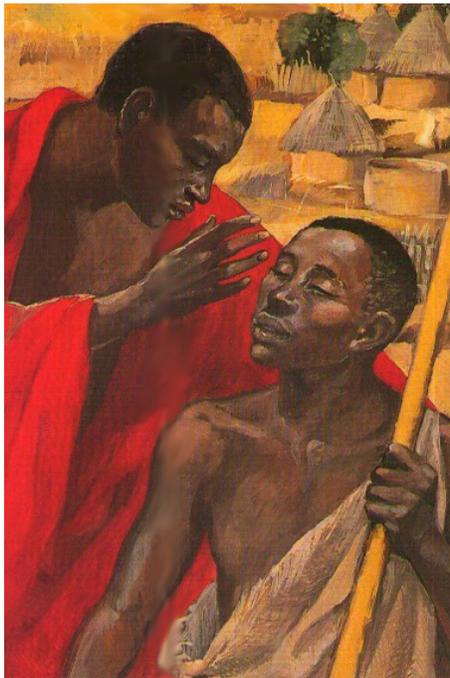
## The outward sign

The outward sign, that which is seen and heard in this sacrament, is the laying of hands upon the sick person by a priest of the Church. There is also an anointing of the sick person with holy oil blessed by the bishop. As the priest anoints the forehead of the sick person he says, *Through this holy anointing may the Lord help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit.* The priest also anoints the palms of the sick person as he says these words, *May*

*the Lord who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up.*

## Biblical Roots

In all of our discussions of the seven sacraments we have examined how they are rooted in the will of Christ and that they fulfill either an explicit or implicit command of Christ. Anointing of the sick is no exception. We do not have an explicit instruction by Christ to the apostles that they were to anoint the sick. Such an instruction is strongly implied



however in a passage from Mark's gospel. Jesus sent the apostles forth two by two to proclaim the kingdom. The following description is given of their actions: *So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.* (Mk 6:12-13) Evidently then, Jesus had instructed them to anoint the sick with oil. The instructions of Jesus were also handed on in the early Church as is evident from this

passage from the Letter of James: *Is any among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters [i.e. "priests"] 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 person, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* (James 5:14-15).

Here then are the biblical roots of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The scriptures instruct us that the sick are to receive prayers and be anointed with oil. The Catholic Church in obedience to these instructions has preserved and enshrined them ever since in the celebration of the sacrament.

## The Ministers of the Sacrament

We also observe the instructions by limiting the administration of this sacrament to priests. The passage from the Letter of James indicates that the "presbyters" are to be called. *Presbyteros* is the Greek word from which the English word, "Priest" is derived. Likewise, the passage from the Gospel of Mark sets the anointing of the sick in the context of the mission of the "Twelve." As we saw in our consideration of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, Jesus gave certain tasks only to the Twelve Apostles. Our Catholic tradition is to preserve this distinction made by the Lord himself by entrusting these certain tasks only to priests. Thus the celebration of the care of the sick as a sacrament is celebrated only by priests. This does not mean that others cannot pray for the sick or that others do not receive special charisms for healing (*cf.* 1 Cor 12:9, 28-30)

## Who Receives this Sacrament?

The Sacrament of the Sick is given to baptized Catholics who are seriously ill. Thus, a person with an ordinary virus, flu

or injury is not usually anointed unless such illness or injury has a serious nature due to other pre-existing situations. Since most surgeries are presumed to involve serious maladies and involve significant risk, those scheduled for surgery (especially when general anaesthesia is used) ought to be anointed before the surgery. A person usually anointed only once in the course of an illness or injury. However those suffering from illnesses of a long duration or due to advancing age may be anointed periodically and especially if their condition takes a turn for the worse. Children under the age of seven are not anointed. This is because the sacrament is related to the Sacrament of Confession and is designed to be a remedy against temptations and the effects of sin. Children under the age of seven are usually not presumed to have sufficient use of reason to be considered responsible for sins committed.

In the past, many often waited to the point of death before requesting this sacrament of the priests of the Church. Pastoral care today however emphasizes that this sacrament should be offered long before the final stages of dying set in. When physical illness of a serious or chronic nature sets in the sacrament should be administered sooner rather than later. Likewise, it is a good idea to celebrate the sacrament before surgery takes place. The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is meant foremost to help us experience healing and assist us to live gracefully with our illnesses, and not merely as a Sacrament that prepares us to die.

### **The Graces of this Sacrament.**

One gift to be hoped for in this sacrament is the complete recovery of health. This is sometimes experienced. Miraculous cures are surely a sign of the power of the risen Lord and they were promised as a sign of the reign of God (*cf.* Mk 16:18). And yet this is not all that is meant by the “healing” that is given and experienced in this sacrament. If it were, we might have to conclude that the sacrament had a rather high “failure rate.” This is because miraculous physical recoveries are somewhat rare. The word

“healing” however involves more than just the notion of cure. Even the most intense prayers of an individual with the gift of healing do not always obtain the healing of all illness. In his own day Jesus did not heal everyone. Christ also taught of the inevitability of suffering and the need to remain faithful: *If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me* (Lk. 9:23). St. Paul too experienced the call to faithful endurance as he prayed for a cure of his own illness: *Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

### **The Meaning of Suffering**

Here then is a second understanding of the healing this sacrament offers: the grace to accept one’s own share in the passion of Christ and to be comforted by the vision faith gives.

Apart from faith suffering seems quite difficult to accept and understand. Our Christian faith however teaches us about the nature and fruitfulness of suffering. Perhaps the most central grace of this sacrament is that the sick person receives the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ’s passion. In a certain way the sick are anointed, consecrated, to bear fruit by having their own suffering joined to the once for all perfect suffering of Christ on the cross. By his own suffering Jesus Christ saved us. No human being apart from Christ could ever hope to save even one soul. But the truth is, Christ has willed to join us to his saving work and when our own suffering is joined to his we participate in his saving work. This is what St. Paul means when he writes, *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church* (Col 1:24). We might wonder how anything could be “lacking” in the sufferings of Christ. But Paul’s meaning is clear enough. Our own sufferings are in a mysterious but very real way part of Christ’s sufferings realized across time. When we give him our sufferings they are joined to his own sufferings once upon the cross. Our

sufferings become mystically swept up into his own and as he suffered on the cross we too, in our own sufferings, are present and suffering with him (*cf.* also Romans 8:17). *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...though the grace of this sacrament, [they] contribute to the sanctification of the Church and to the good of all ... for whom the Church suffers and offers herself through Christ to God the Father.* (Catechism # 1522) Just think, our own sufferings become a part of the greatest works of Christ: the salvation of souls and the help of Christians!

To know and understand what a difference our sufferings make in this world is a great comfort and helps us to appreciate the teaching of scripture: *for when I am weak, then I am strong* (2 Cor 12:10). This understanding of suffering obviously needed in a world that increasingly sees suffering as meaningless, an unbearable burden and a life not worth living. Though some despair and turn toward euthanasia, we must understand that the lives of those who suffer perhaps have never been so productive, fruitful and meaningful for *in weakness power is made perfect* (2 Cor. 12:10). Clearly the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick builds up and encourages the faithful and helps prevent the despair that is so common in our modern age.

In addition to the grace of helping conform us to the passion of Christ and give meaning to human suffering, other graces given in this sacrament are well described in the catechism and provide a suitable conclusion to this reflection: *A 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.* (Catechism # 1590)

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