

ANOINTING OF THE SICK – SACRAMENT OF HEALING (C 1499-1532, USC Ch 19)

If anyone among you is sick, he should summon the priests of the Church, and they should pray over him and anoint 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. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The servant prayer of a righteous person is very powerful. (Jas 5:14-16)

“Heal the sick!” The Church has received this charge from the Lord and strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them with her prayers of intercession. She believes in the life-giving presence of Christ, the physician of souls and bodies.” (C 1509)

In this article we will look at:

- Illness in Human Life
- Jesus’ Response to Sickness
- Jesus Transmits His Power to His Disciples
- Sacrament of Healing Becomes Sacrament of the Dying
- Reform of a Sacrament
- Effects of the Sacrament
- Church’s Ministry to the Dying
- Care of the Sick—Responsibility of the Whole Church
- Redemptive Suffering

Illness in Human Life (C 1500-1501)

The Catechism (C1500-1501) states: “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.”

The Church teaches that sin, sickness, suffering and death came into the world when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Since then, sickness has been a part of our lives here on earth. It afflicts saint and sinner alike. As the *Catechism* states above, sickness can be very destructive. It can lead to mental depression, feelings of isolation, discouragement, despair, self-absorption and, worst of all, a sense of feeling of abandonment by God.

On the other *hand*, an encounter with sickness can become a point of great spiritual awakening. *The Catechism* (1501) states that sickness “*can 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.*”

It was during a time of recuperation from injuries that St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola turned their lives over to God. Many people who have had a brush with death decide to live a life more focused on God and in service of others.

Jesus’ Response to Sickness (C 1503-1505, USC pp. 251-252)

Jesus’ care for the sick is the focus of a great number of stories in the four gospels. Again and again, Jesus is a visible, tangible sign of God’s special care for all who are struck down with sickness. Moved by the suffering of the sick, Jesus makes their pain his own: “*He took our infirmities and bore our diseases*” (Mt 8:17).

While Jesus’ concern for the sick was legendary, his compassion pointed to a deeper concern, namely, the healing of the soul, one’s relationship with God. This is especially shown when Jesus heals the paralytic. Before even treating the paralytic’s physical infirmity, Jesus heals his spiritual paralysis: “Your sins are forgiven” (Mk 2:5). The worst form of illness is sickness of the soul, the sickness that keeps us disconnected from God and causes us to think that God has abandoned us.

Pause: *Have you ever had to cope with a serious illness? If so, how did it impact you emotionally and spiritually? What helped you the most during that difficult time? If you never had to deal with a serious illness, how do you think physical illness impacts people emotionally and spiritually?*

Concern for the whole person. While the worst kind of illness is spiritual sickness, it is important to stress that Jesus in his ministry proclaimed God’s concern for the *whole* person—body, mind and spirit. In Jn 10:10, Jesus tells us that he came to share with us God’s abundant life. St. Irenaeus, an early Church Father, stated: “*The glory of God is man fully alive.*”

In his groundbreaking book on *Healing* published in 1974, Francis McNutt states that “every time a sick person came to him in faith, Jesus healed that person. Jesus did not divide the person, as we so often do, into a soul that is to be saved and healed, and a body that is to suffer and remain unhealed. Sickness of the body was part of the kingdom of Satan that Jesus came to destroy” (p. 62-63).

In his ministry, Jesus sought to free people from anything that would hinder them from fully receiving the abundant life that he wanted to share with them. Nowhere in the New Testament do we read that Jesus only came to “save souls.” Jesus came to save, heal, and liberate the whole person. He healed those whose spirits were in bondage to evil spirits and sin. He also healed those whose bodies were lame, blind, and leprous.

When Jesus spoke about our willingness to carry our cross, he was primarily referring to the persecution Christians would have to endure for being his disciples. Jesus’ cross was not the cross of sickness, but that of persecution.

While we can assume that Jesus did not heal all the physically or mentally sick people of his time, never once do we find Jesus say to the ill, “Carry your cross of sickness, it will make you a better person.” As a result, we can only assume that God wants to heal us of our physical or mental illness. Sure illness can bring about a spiritual awakening and draw one closer to God, but it can also hurt or even destroy one’s relationship with God.

Jesus Transmits to His Disciples His Power to Heal (C 1506-1510 USC p. 252)

In Mk 6:7-13, we read that Jesus “*summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits... So they went off and preached repentance. They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil, many who were sick, and cured them.*”

As we read through the pages of the Acts of the Apostles, we see many examples of the Apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, healing the sick (Acts 2:43, 3:1-10, 4:29-31, 5:12-16). The opening quote in the article from James, traditionally used as the scriptural foundation for the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, suggests that the recipient of the sacrament could expect both spiritual and physical healing.

Pause: What spoke to you most in the section we have just read? What did you underline or might have underlined?

Sacrament of Healing Becomes Sacrament of the Dying

Between the ninth and sixteenth centuries, the sacrament of anointing gradually became a sacrament to prepare people for death. While the prayers of the sacrament did mention healing of the body, the faith of the sick person was directed almost exclusively to the spiritual preparation for death shown by the fact that the sacrament was only ministered when a sick person was close to death. The name of the sacrament was changed to *Extreme Unction* (Last Anointing) or Last Rites. We may wonder how a sacrament intended to bring healing to the whole person now became almost totally focused on the spiritual needs of a dying person. What happened to the simple gospel view of Christ healing the whole person? The explanation for the shift in emphasis is complex. One of the reasons was the development of a more negative attitude towards the body. (For more on this, see F. McNutt’s *Healing*, p. 64.)

Reform of a Sacrament (USC p. 253)

Vatican Council II (1962-1965) led to a reform of all the changeable elements of each of the seven sacraments. The following are the key ways that the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick was reformed.

- *Old name restored.* The sacrament received back its old name, Anointing of the Sick. The restored name points to a change in focus. Now it is a sacrament not just for the dying, but also a sacrament of healing for the sick.
- *A wider use of the sacrament.* Prior to Vatican II, this sacrament was only given to the dying. Now it is ministered in a wide variety of situations. Anyone seriously ill may be anointed. A person who, after having been anointed recovers, but then falls gravely ill again, may receive the sacrament a second time. The sacrament may also be repeated in a case where the person’s condition has deteriorated.

A person may be anointed before surgery. Elderly people may be anointed if they have become notably weakened even though no serious illness is present. Mentally ill people may be anointed. People who have lost consciousness or the use of

reason may be anointed as long as there are reasonable grounds to believe that they would have asked for the sacrament if they had full use of their faculties. Finally, sick children may be anointed if they have been baptized.

Since sacraments are for the living, it is not permissible to anoint a person who has been pronounced dead. Other suitable prayers of commendation can be prayed for the deceased.

- *Anointing of the Sick ministers to the whole person.* While the Vatican II reform of the sacrament did mention the healing of the body, the focus was almost exclusively on the spiritual preparation of the soul for passage into everlasting life. In the 1972 reform of the sacrament, the focus is more clearly on the body as well as on the soul.

- *Celebrated in a communal context.* When possible, Anointing of the Sick should take place within the context of the Eucharist. If this is not possible, it is very much desired that some members of the sick person's family or Church family be present. The presence of others communicates to the sick person: "You are not alone in your illness. We are with you."

Celebration of the sacrament (C 1517). If circumstances permit, Anointing of the Sick may be preceded by the Sacrament of Reconciliation. After the introductory rite, there is Liturgy of the Word, followed by a litany and concludes with the laying on of hands. This is followed by an anointing on the forehead and on the hands, by other prayers and possibly with Holy Communion.

Pause: What spoke to you most in the section we have just read? What did you underline or might have underlined?

Effects of the Sacrament (C 1520-1523, USC p. 254)

Regarding the effects of the sacrament, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (p.254) states:

- "When the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given, the hoped-for effect is that, if it be God's will, the person be *physically healed* of illness.
- "But even if there is *no physical healing*, the *primary effect* of the Sacrament is a *spiritual healing* by which the sick person receives the Holy Spirit's gift of peace and courage to deal with the difficulties that accompany serious illness or the frailty of old age. The Holy Spirit renews our faith

in God and helps us withstand the temptations of the Evil One to be *discouraged and despairing* in the face of suffering and death. A sick person's sins are forgiven if he or she was not able to go to Confession prior to the culmination of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

- "Another effect of this sacrament is union with the Passion of Christ. By uniting ourselves more closely with the sufferings of Our Lord, we receive the grace of sharing in the saving work of Christ. In this way, our suffering, joined to the Cross of Christ, contributes to building up the people of God.

- "This sacrament also prepares us for our final journey when we depart from this life. The Anointing of the Sick completes our identification with Jesus Christ that was begun at our Baptism. Its grace and power fortify us in our final struggles before we go to the Father's house."

Church's Ministry to the Dying

Dying is the last thing we get to do well. It is our final legacy to our family and friends. It is always inspiring to witness a dying person face his/her death with confidence and trust in God. It is a good practice to often pray for the grace of a happy and peaceful death. Some ingredients of a happy and peaceful death are: acceptance of one's dying, a sense of God's presence and closeness, the presence of loved ones and of one's Church, and freedom from severe pain.

Sacraments ministered to a dying person (C 1524-1525). *The Catechism* (1525) states that "just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called 'the Sacraments of Christian Initiation,' so too it can be said that *Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life* 'the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland' or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage."

When ministered during the dying process, the Eucharist is called "Viaticum" (food for the journey). In his discourse on the Eucharist (Jn 6:54), Jesus said: "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.*" As soon as a person is deemed to be in danger of death, he/she should be given Holy Viaticum. To wait until a person may become unconscious is to deprive him/her of the spiritual benefits that come with the reception of the Eucharist, the divine food offered to us to help us

make a peaceful passage from this life to the next. We should never underestimate the power of the sacrament to help the dying come to terms with the reality of the situation and prepare them spiritually for their passage into everlasting life.

Pause: Many people do not ask for this sacrament during a time of serious sickness. In your opinion, why?

Care of the Sick—Responsibility of the Whole Church

The General Introduction to the Pastoral Care of the Sick (32-33) states: “If one member suffers in the Body of Christ, which is the Church, all the members suffer with that member” (1Cor 12:26). For this reason, kindness toward the sick and works of charity and mutual help for the relief of every kind of human want are held in special honor. It is fitting that all baptized Christians share in this ministry of mutual charity within the Body of Christ by doing all that they can to help the sick return to health, by showing love for the sick, and by celebrating the sacraments with them.”

From the above, we can see that every member of the Church has a responsibility to be concerned and helpful to the sick members of their parish family. All of us can pray regularly for the sick and for their caregivers. We can also support families with a sick member by cooking meals for them, offering to sit with the sick person and, if needed, offering transportation to the doctor’s office.

In addition to the above, pastors should encourage the formation of prayer teams who could support the sick with their prayer. Can we imagine what a wonderful thing it would be if every parish sets in motion a process that would help its members to discover their God-given charisms or gifts in this area of the Church’s life. Such parishes would have individuals or teams of people who would be available to pray with those who are physically ill, people who feel abandoned by God, people suffering from past wounds and hurts, and even those discerned to be oppressed by evil spirits.

Redemptive Suffering

There is a long tradition in our Church concerning what is called *redemptive suffering*—uniting one’s sufferings to those of Christ on the Cross. This indeed can be a wonderful and grace-filled act when we are sick or have any other kind of difficulty, e.g.

a painful relationship. But it should not be allowed to obscure the Good News that Christ came to heal the sick and not tell them to carry it as a Cross. Redemptive sickness should be seen as an exception and not as normative.

Sometimes people hesitate to ask for prayers for healing in case their sickness is God’s will. Yet at the very same time, they will not hesitate to go to the doctor to receive help. In the face of sickness, it would seem that the best attitude to have is to do all that we can, spiritually and medically, to restore ourselves (or a loved one) to health and, in the meantime, to make the best use of our sickness to bring us closer to God and other hurting people.

Pause: Have you or are you a minister to the sick in your parish? Or have you ever cared for a very sick person? If so, what were those experiences like for you?

Suggested Actions

Consider becoming more involved with and supportive of sick people in your parish. The next time you are sick, ask for people to pray with you for healing.

Meditation

Healing is essential to the gospel message and carries us all the way back to our very idea of God. What kind of a being is God? If we truly believe that God is Love, then it should be easy to believe that healing is an ordinary, not an extraordinary sign of his compassion. Any other attitude toward healing robs the gospel of the reality of God’s revelation of himself as a loving father: “If you, then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Mt 7:11). What is at stake here is not something out on the periphery, but something right at the heart of Christianity: When I speak of God’s love for me, do I speak of it in terms that I, a human being, can understand? Or am I talking about some unreal concept of “divine love” or “charity” that does not touch my real life? (Francis McNutt)

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