

UNDERSTANDING CATHOLICISM 13: ANOINTING OF THE SICK

I. Introduction

In this beautiful sacrament the priest anoints the sick and entrusts them to their merciful Lord so he can strengthen them and save them. The sick may be healed physically, but they are always strengthened spiritually. This sacrament also exhorts the sick to make their suffering redemptive by uniting their ordeal to the Passion and death of Jesus.¹

II. Suffering

A. Regarding the ordeal of suffering, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes the following insightful comment:

“Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences:

- 1) his *powerlessness*,
- 2) his *limitations*, and
- 3) his *finitude*. *Every illness can make us glimpse death.*”²

B. As a result, illness can lead to: *anguish, self-absorption, despair, and even revolt against God*.

1. In our self-indulgent society suffering is often seen as the ultimate evil.
2. However, there is another side to suffering. Illness “can make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward the things which are truly important.
3. Sickness and the prospect of death can also help a person get their priorities right.
4. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.”³

C. Stories:

1. Many of us have tasted the difficulties of a serious illness, if not our own, at least by vicariously observing the suffering of others.
2. In 1972 my dad was experiencing stomach problems. He thought it was a reoccurrence of an ulcer condition he endured years earlier. It was quite a shock when the doctor informed him that he had cancer and only three months to live!
3. A friend of mine was born with club-feet. As a result, he endured numerous surgeries so he could walk. A few years ago, he was in an elevator when it dropped 34 feet breaking both ankles, and the bones in both legs. In a desperate attempt to repair the damage one foot alone had 21 screws. Eventually, both his lower legs needed to be amputated.

¹ CCC, # 1499.

² CCC, # 1500.

³ CCC, # 1501.

III. There is a Connection Between Suffering and Sin

- A. Ultimately sickness, suffering, and death find its origin in the sin of our first parents.
- B. Although it is important to recognize that in individual cases suffering may have no connection with the personal sinfulness of the sufferer, but there are exceptions.
- C. After Jesus cured a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, he subsequently said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you." (Jn 45:14).
- D. It is vital to keep in mind that eternal damnation is a much more frightening state than any physical ailment!

IV. Jesus is the Great Healer

- A. "Christ's compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that "God has visited his people" (Lk 7:16) and that the Kingdom of God is close at hand.
- C. Jesus has the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins (Mk 2:5-12).
- D. He came to heal the *whole man*, soul and body. Jesus is the physician the sick desperately need (Mk 2:17).
 - 1. Jesus' compassion toward all who suffer goes so far that he identifies himself with them: "I was sick and you visited me" (Mt 25:36).
 - 2. His preferential love for the sick has not ceased through the centuries to draw the very special attention of Christians toward all those who suffer in body and soul. It is the source of tireless efforts to comfort them.⁴
 - 3. Often Jesus asks the sick to believe (Mk 5:34, 36; 9:23).
 - 4. He made use of signs to heal: *spittle* and the *laying on of hands* (Mk 7:32-36; 8:22-25), *mud* and *washing* (Jn 9:6-7).
 - 5. However, as in the sacraments, the power is always in Jesus, not in the signs.
 - 6. The sick try to touch Jesus, "for power came forth from him and healed them all" (Lk 6:19).
 - 7. In the sacraments Christ continues to "touch" us in order to heal us.⁵ St. Mark, in particular, stressed the power of healing that emanated from the body of Jesus: "And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or country, they laid the sick in the market places, and besought him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well" (Mk 6:56).
- E. The Compassionate Jesus
 - 1. "Moved by so much suffering, Christ not only allowed himself to be touched by the sick, but he made their miseries his own: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." (Mk 8:17).
 - 2. But he did not heal all the sick.

⁴ CCC, # 1503.

⁵ CCC, # 1504.

3. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing that was needed, the victory over sin and death through his Passover.
4. Therefore, on the cross Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away the “sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), of which physical illness is only one consequence.
5. By his passion and death on the cross Christ gave a new meaning to suffering. It can now configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion.⁶

F. Jesus Suffered

When Jesus expressed the depth of his suffering and the terrible feeling of abandonment in Gethsemane and on the cross, he took into himself all the sufferings and feelings of abandonment of the entire human race. So, Jesus exclaimed:

“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Mt 26:38).

“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, la’ma sabach’-tha’ni?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’” (Mt 27:46)?

V. Let’s Consider Redemptive Suffering

- A. Many Christians do not understand the blessing of redemptive suffering in their own lives. The saints, in contrast, expressed joy when they had something to suffer because it made them more like Jesus. In this context St. Paul wrote:

“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).

1. Paul does not imply that anything is lacking in Jesus’ infinite merits. Rather what he completes is the participation of one of Jesus’ members in the work of the Master’s redemptive suffering by uniting his suffering to those of Jesus’ Passion.
2. In this context the Catechism teaches: “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).
3. Therefore, “Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus” (CCC, # 1521).
- B. Consider, for example, St. John of the Cross. He asked God for three blessings as his life neared its end.
 1. That he be sent to a monastery where he was unknown.
 2. That he would not be a religious superior.

⁶ CCC, # 1505.

3. Lastly, He asked God that he would have the privilege to suffer much before he died, so he would be more like Jesus.
 4. God answered his prayer.
- C. As in all things Jesus led the way by his example, for no one ever suffer to the degree Jesus suffered. He did it as an offering for us. Consider the following poignant passage from the Book of Hebrews:
- “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience [love] through what he suffered; and being made perfect [in his surrender to suffering in love] he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:7-10).
- D. It is through our surrendering to the gift of suffering in our own lives that we are transformed into Christ.
1. St. Paul declared, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). This passage is quoted in the Jesus Prayer.
 2. The Apostle can make that statement because he introduces that statement with these words: “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal; 2:20).
 3. In his letter to the Romans, Paul addressed the blessing of suffering:
 “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that sufferings produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:3-5).
 4. Finally, it is important to remember that Jesus said that those that do not take up their cross and follow him are not worthy of him (Mt 10:38).

VI. Jesus Gave the Power of Healing to His Church

When Jesus commissioned the Apostles for their first mission, he commanded: “Cure the sick” (Mt 10:8). After the Resurrection Jesus gave the eleven a mission with the power in his name to “lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16:18). It is evident in the Acts of the Apostles that the apostles exercised this power (Acts 3:7-8; 9:34; 14:3). It is also clear in St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit gave a special charism (gift) of healing to the Church (1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30).

We tend to give great attention to the marvel of physical healings, but the greater miracle is the transforming grace to accept suffering with a glad heart so that weak men and women can deposit their distress into the ocean of Jesus’ redemptive suffering. It is already plain in the New Testament that the Church possessed a specific rite to heal and support the sick.

A. St. James attests to this sacrament in the apostolic Church.

1. "Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church [*presbyters* -from which we get the word "priest"], 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 [from sin and perhaps from illness], and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven" (Jas 5:14-15).
2. Council of Trent affirmed this sacrament:
"This sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the New Testament. It is alluded to by Mark (Mk 6:13 – the mission of the twelve: "And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them."), but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of the Lord (Jas 5:14-15)."⁷
3. Therefore, the Catechism teaches that the Apostolic Tradition "has recognized in this rite one of the seven sacraments"⁸

B. Let's Consider the History of the Rite

1. From ancient times in the liturgical traditions of both the Eastern and Western Church, we have testimonies to the practice of anointing of the sick with blessed oil.
2. Over the centuries the Anointing of the Sick was conferred more and more exclusively on those at the point of death. Because of this practice it received the name "Extreme Unction" – popularly called the "Last Rites."
3. "Notwithstanding this evolution," the Catechism affirms, "the liturgy has never failed to beg the Lord that the sick person may recover his health if it would be conducive to his salvation."⁹

C. Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council aided our understanding of this Sacrament when it stated:

"The sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given to those who are seriously ill by anointing them on the forehead and hands with duly blessed oil - pressed from olives or from other plants - saying, only once: "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."¹⁰

D. Administration of the Sacrament

1. *Who should be the recipient?*
 - a. "The Anointing of the Sick is *not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death*. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in *danger of*

⁷ Council of Trent (1551), *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Extreme Unction* 1.1 (DS 1695).

⁸ CCC, # 1510; See the Councils of: Constantinople II (553), Florence (1439), and Trent (1551).

⁹ CCC, # 1512.

¹⁰ CCC, # 1513.

death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.”¹¹

c. “The faithful should encourage the sick to call for a priest to receive this sacrament.”¹²

2. *How often received?*

a. “If a sick person who received this anointing recovers his health, he can in the case of another grave illness receive this sacrament again. If during the same illness the person's condition becomes more serious, the sacrament may be repeated.”¹³

c. It is fitting to receive the Anointing of the Sick just prior to a *serious operation*.

d. “The same holds for the elderly whose frailty becomes more pronounced.”¹⁴

3. *Who administers the sacrament?*

“Only priests (bishops and presbyters) are ministers of the Anointing of the Sick.”¹⁵

4. *How is it celebrated?*

a. This special anointing can be administered by itself but, if possible, it is best to celebrate it within the Eucharist.

b. Often this sacrament is preceded by the sacrament of Penance and followed by Holy Communion.

c. “As the sacrament of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist should always be the last sacrament of the earthly journey, the “viaticum” for [the] “passing over” to eternal life.”¹⁶

5. *What are the key elements?*

a. The priest lays hands on the sick person

b. The priest prays over the sick person calling down the Holy Spirit in the faith of the Church

c. The priest anoints the sick person with oil blessed, if possible, by the bishop.

VII. The Sacramental Graces Received

A. *A particular gift of the Holy Spirit.*

1. The first grace of this sacrament is the gift of strengthening, peace and the courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. The trials of old age are not for whims!

2. The strengthening grace of this sacrament is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews our trust and faith in God while he strengthens us against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death or a serious

¹¹ CCC, # 1514.

¹² CCC, # 1516.

¹³ CCC, # 1515

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ CCC, # 1516.

¹⁶ CCC, # 1517.

illness. Painful illnesses are difficult to endure. Therefore, this sacrament combats the temptation to end suffering by suicide.

3. This loving assistance from the Lord by the power of his Spirit is meant primarily to lead the sick person to healing of his soul, but also of the healing of his body if that is God's will.
4. Furthermore, this sacrament forgives sins. In the words of St. James: 'if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven'" (Jas 5:15).¹⁷
5. Let's consider an example.

Some years ago, I was asked to accompany a young employee to his father's death bed. When we arrived, his father was aware of our presence, but he was unable to speak. His body moved restlessly, as if he was in a state of stress and was fighting something. When the priest approached his bed he whispered in his ear, "Would you like to go to confession?" The poor man responded positively by blinking his eyes and slightly nodding his head. Using the same method of communication, the priest went through a list of sins which, if applicable, the dying man answered positively by blinking and nodding. As soon as the priest said the words, "and I absolve you of your sins," there was an amazing transformation in the sick man. His face and body relaxed. It was obvious to everyone in the room that he was visibly at peace. What took place next, left us in awe. The priest turned to the son and said, "Your dad is ready to die now." Then the sick man exhaled loudly. He was gone to his Lord. It was the first time I understood the expression, falling asleep in the Lord.

B. This sacrament creates a special *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 his configuration to the Savior's redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, [acquires a new meaning for the faithful Christian]; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus."¹⁸

C. The Catechism teaches that the Anointing of the Sick also gives *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.'¹⁹ By celebrating this sacrament, the Church, in the communion of saints, intercedes for the benefit of the sick person, and he, for his part, through 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."²⁰

1. This anointing is a wonderful *preparation for the final journey*.

¹⁷ CCC, # 1520.

¹⁸ CCC, # 1521.

¹⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 11 2.

²⁰ CCC, # 1522.

The Catechism states: "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).²¹ ... It completes the holy anointing that marks the whole Christian life: that of Baptism, which sealed the new life in us, and that of Confirmation that 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."²²

2. Therefore, *sins are forgiven* by this sacrament if the sick person was not able to obtain this forgiveness through the sacrament of Confession.²³
3. Lastly, *physical healing* may also be granted if it is conducive to the salvation of the sick person's soul.²⁴

Let me give an Illustration. My dear friend Jerry Weigand was moved to ask to see a priest. He was under the care of Hospice with 80% of his heart not functioning. He was told that he only had a few days to live. Jerry needed assistance to get out of bed and walk. He couldn't bathe himself. He had very little appetite.

The day after receiving the Sacrament of the Sick, Jerry was hungry. He was able to get out of bed and take shower without assistance. In a few days, he no longer needed the help of Hospice. He could prepare his own meals, drive and do essential shopping. His recovery seemed miraculous.

Jerry lived for over a year after receiving the Sacrament of the Sick. It was a year of grace, as he prepared to meet his Lord and Savior. Shortly before he died, Jerry was again blessed to receive the Sacrament of the Sick, which prepared him for his final journey. This marvelous sacrament completed Jerry's "conformity to the death and Resurrection of Christ, just as [his] baptism began it" (CCC, # 1523).

4. *Strengthening* is also granted in this sacrament for *passing over to eternal life*.²⁵ It is amazing to see how this sacrament brings peace to those who are dying!

VII. Conclusion

"Thus, 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. They are according to the Catechism, "the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly

²¹ Council of Trent, (1551): DS 1698.

²² CCC, # 1523.

²³ CCC, # 1532.

²⁴ CCC, # 1532.

²⁵ CCC, # 1532.

homeland" or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage."²⁶ This lovely sacrament is another proof of God's tender love for us. God takes notice of every aspect of our lives; nothing escapes his tender mercy. No one loves like God loves.

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²⁶ CCC # 1525.