

This weekend wraps our readings from Saint James. James took a fairly practical and direct approach in writing his letters. One of the things he wrote about—although the lectionary for Mass leaves it out—is the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. Like I did at the beginning of the month, I’m going to follow James’ example and be super practical. A review of anointing of the sick and the Last Rites is long overdue.

James writes: “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters 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.” (James 5:14-15). The purpose of anointing is to give spiritual strength and courage to a person who is facing a serious illness, preparing for major surgery or who is elderly. We should be anointed at the BEGINNING of a serious illness. It can be repeated if the illness gets worse or if we get sick again. For the elderly, the guidelines are less clear; I recommend repeating the sacrament if you feel it is necessary but not more than once a month. We offer anointing during the 9 am Mass on the First Saturdays of the month.

Anointing is part of the last rites but it is not THE last rite. THE last rite is viaticum, the Eucharist which is received close to death. There is a lot of confusion about this. A person must be conscious enough to swallow the body of Christ. The vast majority of the time when I am called to give someone the last rites, I am being called too late to administer viaticum. Some priests will place a small particle of the eucharist on the unconscious or barely conscious person’s tongue. I did this twice when I was first ordained because I thought it was the right thing to do and also the families insisted on it. Never again. Both times I had to pry the persons’ mouths open like I would if I were giving my dog a pill; that was uncomfortable for them, and then they spit the tiny particle out. Remember that Jesus is truly present in even the tiniest fragment of a consecrated host and in the tiniest drop of the precious blood. Unless the person is alert enough to know what is happening, I cannot give them Jesus’ body as viaticum so don’t wait until the last minute to make that call.

Another part of the last rites is the “Apostolic Pardon.” Anointing of the sick brings forgiveness for sins—as James said—but it is assumed that the person has been going to Confession. It is not okay to skip confession and wait until you are anointed. The apostolic pardon is given to someone in serious danger of death but it does not have to be at the moment of death. I am going to read you the two forms of the Apostolic Pardon now. I am not administering it to you—no one is

being pardoned! Here it is: “Through the holy mysteries of our redemption, may almighty God release you from all punishments in this life and in the life to come. May he open to you the gates of paradise and welcome you to everlasting joy.” The alternate form says this: “By the authority which the Apostolic See has given me, I grant you a full pardon and the remission of all your sins.” Aren’t those awesome words?!?!? Wouldn’t they bring you great comfort if you were to hear them prayed over you as you were approaching the end of your life? Shouldn’t our loved ones be able to hear those words prayed over them as well?

We know that people who are unconscious can still hear what is said to them but we don’t know how much they understand. We speak a lot about comfort care: giving nutrition and hydration and pain medication to ease a person’s physical suffering. What about easing their spiritual suffering? Why do we deny our loved ones the opportunity to hear those words of pardon and deny them the opportunity to physically receive the Body of Jesus by waiting to call the priest until the person is unresponsive or “actively dying”? Please contact your priest while your loved one is still able to participate in these sacraments. Tell your children or other potential caregivers to do that for you.

Emergencies happen. God understands that and makes allowances for that. However, the vast majority of the emergency calls that I have received since I have been a priest became emergencies because people waited until the last minute before contacting me. While I understand the motivations behind waiting until the last minute in all of those cases, the danger is that when there is only one priest in a parish—and this parish only has one priest in it—there will be times when that priest is going to be unavailable because he has previously scheduled appointments and commitments. This is not a matter of the priest’s convenience although we do need to be respectful of each other’s needs and boundaries. This is a matter of how to best serve and care for the people who need those sacraments. Waiting until something becomes an emergency is not the best way to help our loved ones.

The Last Rites lead to the funeral rites. That is for another time, probably in November in connection to All Souls Day. That sounds depressing, I know...but remember this: everything we do and say with regard to illness, suffering, and death is done in the hope of the resurrection. The sacraments of healing—reconciliation, anointing and also the Eucharist—are given to us to help us on our journey through this life so that we can maintain our focus and hope on life in heaven. These sacraments are signs that we do not need to be afraid. These sacraments are signs that Jesus is always with us.