

The Sacrament of Anointing

The very first book of the Bible teaches us that suffering and sickness are the result of original sin. Before this sin, Adam and Eve were kept free from pain, illness, and death.

When Jesus came to earth, he showed special love and kindness for the sick and dying. Many of his miracles touched the suffering. He gave sight to the blind, speech to the mute, strength to the paralyzed, and he even raised the dead to life. Can you imagine the joy that leapt up in the people's hearts as they saw their sick friends cured or their paralyzed relatives walking? Truly Good News *has* come to us, they must have exclaimed!

But more important to Jesus was the curing of souls. For reasons known to himself he did not cure everyone. To show that he did not abandon the sick and suffering Jesus gave us the **sacrament of Anointing, also called the Sacrament of the Sick**. Through this sacrament, Jesus gives to the Church's suffering members the spiritual aid to enable them to use their pain for their spiritual perfection, to heal them if it is God's will, and to prepare them for death when the time comes.

Jesus Shares His Healing Power

During His ministry on earth Jesus shared his healing power with his disciples. Saint Mark, who was a close friend of the Apostle Peter, tells us about this: *Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two, giving them authority over unclean spirits. They went off, preaching the need of repentance. They expelled many demons, anointed the sick with oil, and worked many cures. (Mk 6:7, 12-13)*

After his Resurrection, Jesus' disciples continued to use this healing power in the sacrament of Anointing. The letter of Saint James the Apostle tells us that the priests would use holy oil and special prayers to forgive the sins of the sick and even to restore them to health: *Is there anyone sick among you? He should ask for the presbyter (priests) of the Church. They in turn are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. This prayer uttered in faith will reclaim the one who is ill, and the Lord will restore him to health. If he has committed any sins, forgiveness will be his. (James 5:14-15)*

Many Catholics do not realize that this sacrament has the power to cure them in body as well as soul. Of course, this would depend upon the plan that God has for the sick person's life. Perhaps the suffering a person experiences helps him to do penance for his sins so that he can go straight to Heaven when he dies. Or maybe it is simply his time to leave this earth and go to his true home with God. But the fact remains that many priests have witnessed actual bodily cures as a result of the sacrament of Anointing.

The Purpose of This Sacrament

For the first twelve hundred years of Christianity, this sacrament was seen as one of healing for both body and soul. Catholics received it whenever they were seriously ill or in danger of death.

But then some people began to develop a strange attitude toward Anointing. They saw it as a sure sign of death, and so they would not call a priest to anoint their sick relatives! They would put the sacrament off until the last moment of life, and it began to be called the "Last Rites".

In our day, the Church wants us to understand that Anointing is not to be feared or put off until death is certain. It is meant to help a person prepare for *possible* death by taking away sins and giving peace to the soul. It helps the person who receives it to accept God's plan for his life and to die a holy death if this is God's will. Through this sacrament, the sick and the elderly encounter Jesus, who comes to give them his peace and comfort. The Second Vatican Council told us:

The Sacrament of the Sick should be given, not at the point of death, but as soon as a Christian begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age (Sacrosanctum concilium, III, 73).

The Sign and Effect of Anointing

The special sign of this sacrament consists of (1) **anointing with blessed oil of the sick**, and (2) the following prayer which the priest says while touching the sick person's forehead and hands with the oil:

The Sign of anointing - *Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen. May the Lord, who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up. Amen. (Rite of Anointing)*

We can tell from this sign what is happening to the person who receives it properly. First, he is strengthened spiritually to accept God's plan for his life. In the early days of the Church, oil was seen as something that gave strength. The Greek athletes would rub it on their muscles before a race or others sports events. Blessed oil is a sign of God's strength and the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, the person's venial sins are forgiven - and his mortal sins if he is unable to confess - which prepares him to go to Heaven when he dies. When the priest anoints the forehead, he reminds us to be sorry for sins of thought; the touching of the hands reminds us of those sins committed by deeds.

The Rite of Anointing

The Sacrament of the sick can be given anywhere: in the hospital, in a church, at the scene of an accident, or in one's home. Let us see how it is celebrated in the home of the sick person.

After the family has called the priest, they should cover a small table or nightstand with a white cloth. On this is placed a crucifix, two candles, and a small bowl of water. The priest will bring everything else.

Upon entering the home, the priest calls down God's blessing and sprinkles the sick person's room with holy water. Then he explains the purpose and meaning of the sacrament to the family.

Then, either the sick person receives the sacrament of Penance or else everyone joins in a penitential rite. After all recite the prayer "I Confess. . ." there is a reading from the Bible that deals with healing and forgiveness. Then it is time for the actual administration of the sacrament. The priest anoints the person with the oil of the sick and says the prayer we have already read. After the anointing, he gives Holy Communion to the person and to those present, who also wish to receive. The home ceremony closes with a blessing from the priest.

Indulgences

While this sacrament is usually received in old age, we should not wait until then to prepare ourselves for a good and holy death. We can begin now by praying daily, receiving the sacraments often, and storing up for ourselves "treasure in Heaven" (Mt 6:20), as Jesus called all our prayers and good works.

One way we can do this is gaining *indulgences*. **Indulgences** are spiritual riches which shorten or even take away the time we must spend in Purgatory making up for our sins. All of our prayers and good works make us more pleasing to God. The Church reminds us of this by attaching indulgences to certain prayers and works. By saying these prayers or performing these actions devoutly, we show our love for God, and he lessens the punishment we will receive for our past sins. Indulgences can be plenary (which take all our punishment away) or partial (which take some of it away).

Words to know: anointing; oil of the sick; sign of anointing; indulgence