

Living a Catholic Life

The Anointing of the Sick

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between dioceses, parishes, Knights of Columbus councils, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is referred to in the New Testament and explicitly dealt with by the ecumenical councils of Constantinople II, Florence, and Trent. Citing Trent, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states,

“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 indeed by Mark, but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of the Lord.” ... Over the centuries the Anointing of the Sick was conferred more and more exclusively on those at the point of death. Because of this it received the name “Extreme Unction.” Notwithstanding this evolution 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. (nn. 1511–1512)

In *Ordo unctionis infirmorum eorumque pastoralis curae* of the revised rite, the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship retains the Scholastic and Tridentine emphases on the Anointing of the Sick’s being a remedy for sin and aid in dying, but the Congregation also restores to the Church’s conscious appreciation other equally traditional elements of the sacrament, such as its being an aid to grapple with the riddle of human suffering vis-à-vis the Paschal Mystery and the possibility of healing (in a sense inclusive of body and soul). Here it is taught that the sacrament should not be delayed until the dying process clearly begins but is available to anyone seriously ill, the sacrament can be repeated if one falls ill again or if the present illness takes a turn for the worse, and one may be anointed before surgery. Dead bodies may not be anointed, but their souls should be prayed for. The doubtfully dead should be anointed conditionally (nn. 8–15). Interestingly, the Congregation says, “Elderly people may be anointed if they have become notably weakened even though no serious illness is present” (n. 11). This is an important development in the history of the sacrament, inasmuch as it highlights more effectively the distinctiveness of this sacrament and what precisely it does.

Beyond being a sign and avenue of grace, the Anointing of the Sick provides insight into the question, How does medicine relate to sickness? The answer may seem obvious, inasmuch as the art of medicine finds its precise role in the cure of illness and the relief of physical suffering. While this is a true assertion, what are the implications of this fact? First, no one denies that health

care professionals do not confine their activity to diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. Theirs should be a high-touch relationship with the patient, such that they come to know the latter’s treatment values and perhaps something of his or her philosophy of life or religion. Nevertheless, theirs is an objective relationship focused on the medical condition of the patient.

Second, what remains essentially a medical condition for the health care professional is experienced by the patient as a human dilemma involving questions of the existence of evil (physical evil in me), the reality of suffering, and the matrix of meaning by which the patient faces this reality of suffering beyond the confines of physical pain. Basically, we cannot expect medical science to answer human dilemmas, because they cannot be reduced to medical conditions. Reducing the drama of illness to medical coordinates abstracts one’s dilemma from the human heart, the arena of one’s lived experience. Suggested means of treatment do not assuage one’s deeper encounter with frailty and mortality, and the medical art offers little that is positive by which one might do so. The medical art exists to extend the number of battles with this or that illness not to give the meaning of life.

The Anointing of the Sick neither replaces science nor denigrates it. Rather, the celebration of this sacrament effectively contextualizes the larger horizon in which the physical evils of illness, frailty, and mortality are experienced. The battle with sickness will be waged differently and with varying success in each person’s life. What does not vary is the Christian framework in which suffering is understood. Each sacrament signifies and effects, in the life of any given individual, the saving action of Christ in his Paschal Mystery. The Church teaches that the Anointing of the Sick is “a particular gift of the Holy Spirit. The first 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 gift, like all sacraments, forgives sins. It unites those who suffer with the Passion of Christ: “Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.” United to the Cross of the Lord, it becomes redemptive of others. And finally, it is a preparation for the final journey home to the Lord: “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” (*Catechism*, nn. 1520, 1521, 1525).