



# Ethically Speaking...

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## Ethically Speaking...

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## Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick: What you Need to Know

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The Anointing of the Sick is one of the seven sacraments of the Church. Of all the sacraments, it is the *one* in which we most poignantly face our human frailty and mortality. It is also perhaps, the most forgotten in the life of the Church because we don't think about it until we are literally at death's door. As a spiritual care practitioner supporting those journeying through end of life, I am privileged to be present during the sacrament and have witnessed first-hand the grace and healing it brings to all who receive it. I have also witnessed the disappointment and heartbreak of patients and families because their request to receive the sacrament was made too late. Such late requests are often the result of a misunderstanding of the sacrament's purpose and intent. It is our hope this article can offer a better understanding of when and why it should be requested.

### In the Beginning

The healing ministry of Jesus is the foundation and origin of the anointing of sick. Healing was an essential part of the mission given to the disciples and our mission as Church is to continue to do what Jesus did. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus gives his apostles the authority to heal the sick (Mark 6:7, 7-13; 16:15-18). The early Church continued this healing ministry: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven." (James 5: 14-16)



In the early centuries after Christ, the Sacrament became an established practice and was meant to heal both spiritual and physical suffering. The early rituals included the anointing of the sick person with blessed oil and prayers offered by the elders of the church. (Rogge 1975)

In the course of time, the rite took on a different emphasis, shifting from healing to forgiveness of sins. The timing of the sacrament was also delayed to the deathbed when forgiveness of sins would also prepare the person for heaven. (Rogge 1975) "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", or the "last anointing". (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1512).

With the Second Vatican Council the rite was now to be called "The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #73). Vatican II not only introduced a new name but restored the original intent of the rite; the Council urged that the Sacrament be renewed to include prayer for healing as well as for the remission of sin. It also provided a deeper understanding of the sacrament and significantly expanded the number of individuals who could receive it. Anointing "is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death but is intended for all who are seriously ill" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #73) and encompasses both physical and spiritual healing.

## The Anointing of the Sick

Its important to understand that the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is both "a liturgical and a communal celebration." Indeed, many parishes have masses at which many persons receive the sacrament, and these celebrations can be a "source of strength amid pain and weakness, hope amid despair" and a "joyful encounter" for the entire community (Christifideles Laici #54).



The intent of this article is to highlight specifically those situations where the Sacrament is requested for individuals who are seriously ill and/or near end of life. When a person is seriously ill, it is appropriate to celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick. Even though Vatican II changed the name of the sacrament people still fear calling a priest because it means you are going to die. That has never been the Church's understanding of the Sacrament. So, what is the purpose of the sacrament if not for death?

According to Catholic doctrine, this sacrament serves as a channel for special graces from God to bring spiritual and even physical strength and healing during an illness, especially near the time of death. Since the Sacrament includes absolution of sins, the Sacrament is only administered by a priest or a bishop.

The Rite of Anointing occurs when a priest prays over, lays hands on and anoints the sick person on the forehead and palms of the hands with the Oil of the Sick, a holy oil blessed once a year by the bishop as part of the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday. Each parish receives some to be use in the Rite of Anointing. Anointing with oil is intended to strengthen the sick person. The person may be strengthened to face the illness or surgery, or the person might be strengthened to face death.



As noted the purpose of the sacrament is to strengthen, comfort and bring about healing. Like all sacraments it is an act of faith that graces the whole person body, mind, and spirit. The blessing over the oil asks God to "send the power of your Holy Spirit, the Consoler, into this precious oil. Make this oil a remedy for all who are anointed with it; heal them in body, in soul and in spirit and deliver them from every affliction" (Pastoral Care of the Sick #123).

The Sacrament also includes the opportunity for the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Penance) and of Viaticum (Holy Eucharist). Viaticum is the term used for one's last Communion. Just as our first Communion is marked with solemnity and considered a special event, so too should our last.



For those approaching death, Viaticum is the 'last' sacrament and considered 'food for the journey'. (Pastoral Care of the Sick, 175) The Anointing of the Sick is for anyone who is seriously ill whereas Viaticum is for the dying. Unlike, the rite of Anointing which can only be administered by a priest, Viaticum can when necessary, be administered by a Eucharistic Minister. (Beuken 202 pg. 36)

### Effects of the Sacrament

According to Catholic doctrine, the Anointing of the Sick affects the sick person in the following ways:

- It provides courage, strength, and peace
- It gives the sick person grace to unite his or her suffering to the passion of Christ.
- It provides physical and/or spiritual healing according to God's will.
- It offers necessary graces so that the sick person may prepare for death.
- It offers consolation and hope.
- It provides an opportunity for the forgiveness of sins even when the sick person is too ill to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation.

(CCCC #1520-23)

### Who Can Receive This Sacrament?

According to the Pastoral Care of the Sick, this sacrament is celebrated with those who are seriously ill, who are diagnosed with life-limiting illness, or those facing major surgery. The illness

may be physical, mental or spiritual and it is encouraged that the sacrament be received early. Those who are frail from age or illness as well as baptized children old enough to be comforted may also receive the sacrament. The sacrament may be received more than once, even during the same illness if it progresses in seriousness or if the person experiences a different illness or injury. However, it is not necessary to repeatedly anoint a person who is ill.

The Sacrament is ideally celebrated when the sick person is conscious but is often administered to individuals who have lost consciousness. In this case the Church relies on the desire of the family who requests this and on the presumption that the person would choose the anointing if they could. It is encouraging to note that studies have shown that hearing is the last sense to go before dying, so even if a person is not responding they may still be able to hear what is being said and know that the priest is present. (Blundon et al. 2020) Where possible, family members are encouraged to be present and participate in this sacramental celebration.

Those who have been distanced from the Church may mistakenly believe they cannot receive the sacrament, but this is incorrect. If they so choose, they can receive the anointing of the sick should they be open to and request it.

Since all sacraments of the Church are an encounter between a living person and God within the Church community, anointing an already dead person is not possible. The ritual however provides official prayers for the dead and the consolation of the living as part of the Church's pastoral care.

## When to call a priest

In the past, it was commonly thought that one needed to be at the doorstep of death to receive this sacrament, but there is no need not wait for such an extreme situation to call a priest. Pastoral care of the sick should be requested for the person particularly if they are elderly or are living alone whether they are at home or in a healthcare facility. If someone in your family or a friend is at home call the parish. Discuss the situation and ask for a priest or minister to visit and arrange for Anointing of the Sick as well as the other sacraments. When a person is seriously ill or dying, call at once – don't wait until the person is unconscious or barely able to talk or respond. If they aren't registered in a particular parish or have been distanced from the Church, search out the Parish closest to their home.

For those in hospital, assisted living, long term care or in hospice/palliative care, ask the attending staff for the procedure to request the Sacrament. Most facilities will have someone appointed to assist with these requests. Along with Sacrament of the Sick, healthcare facilities such as our local Hospice Residential Home for example, also provides Holy Eucharist to residents and families who request it. When death is imminent, the nursing staff or spiritual care practitioner should be notified so that Viaticum and Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick can be arranged without delay.

The Sacrament of the Sick is given to those who are seriously ill, facing surgery or in danger of death. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit that brings peace and

gives us courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the illness and frailties of our humanity. It is not to be feared or put off, rather it should be offered to those who are at the most vulnerable time in their lives. Remember don't wait until it is too late, make the call sooner rather than later.

## References & Resources

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