

RCIA CLASS 17B – ANOINTING OF THE SICK

I. The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is based upon Jesus' special concern for the sick call for the Apostles to carry on His healing presence.

A. During His earthly ministry, Jesus had a special concern for the ill, and performed most of His recorded miracles on their behalf. See, e.g., Mark 1:32-34; Luke 7:18-23.

B. Both during His earthly ministry and just before the Ascension, Jesus commissioned His disciples to carry on that ministry to the sick as a sign of the Kingdom of God. See, e.g., Luke 9:1-2, 10:8-9; Mark 16:18. The Apostles began showing the power of the faith by miracles of healing. See, e.g., Acts 3:1-26, 5:14-16.

C. The letter of James ends with instructions for the Church, including a special call to anoint the sick. See James 5:13-15.

D. Healing of sickness is a natural image for healing from sin, for Jesus is the Divine Physician healing us from spiritual ills. See, e.g. Mark 2:17; Is. 53:4-5.

II. On a natural level, there is a special need for strength in the midst of grave illness and a desire for healing for both body and soul.

A. Conferring strength to people with illnesses that may lead to death is particularly important, both because such illnesses could be the end of the earthly journey and because such illness can lead to either spiritual reawakening, strength and witness to faith, on the one hand, or despair and sin on the other. See Catechism 1501.

B. God is not the author of sin and death, but does permit them for His own purposes, for He can bring good out of them. Among other things, God can use illnesses to: (1) train the soul, chisling the body as one would stones to build a Temple that it might become more fit for the heavenly kingdom; (2) detach us from earthly things, that we might seek more the things of heaven; (3) enable us to make a greater offering to God, from our struggles and not just surplus; (4) cleanse us from sins and prevent us from other sins; and (5) join us more to Christ and enable us to be a greater witness to Him. See St. Gregory the Great, Rule of Pastoral Care, Book III, ch. 12.

- A primary effect of Anointing of the Sick is to bring forth such effects, enabling the recipient to become more noble, at peace with God, and a more glorious witness to the Kingdom.

C. But we should seek to preserve our health, for as St. Gregory says, the body is the "harp of the soul," through which we can learn to play music to God forever. And so we should try to develop this harp, which is a gift from God. Epistle to Archbishop Leander of Seville, Chapter V of Letters of St. Gregory.

- Thus, the sacrament of Anointing does often give healing, and always gives the ability to resist sins such as impatience and despair that illness can tempt one to.

II. The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given by a priest to one who is suffering from an illness or age that poses a significant danger of death. See Catechism 1515.

A. If the person wishes to go to Confession, that sacrament fittingly precedes the anointing. But if Confession is not feasible, the anointing confers forgiveness of sins as Confession would. See James 5:15; Instructions for Anointing of the Sick, paragraph 6.

B. As with the other sacraments, this Sacrament begins with the invocation of the Trinity through the sign of the Cross. The priest then proceeds onto a call to enter into the cleansing presence of Christ by recalling to mind one's sins and asking God for forgiveness.

C. There is then ideally a reading from Scripture. As with the Mass and other sacraments, the written word of God prepares one to receive the divine Word of God made man.

- The Scriptural reading can be followed by a homily, but in practice, such homilies are not common for individual anointings. It is more common for liturgies in which a larger number of people are anointed.

D. There are then ideally intercessions for the one to be anointed and for all the sick. These intercessions bring the whole people of God into that realm of Providence. Only a priest can confer the sacrament, but the healing presence of God is meant to be in the context of the whole People of God.

E. The priest then gives the sacrament itself, which consists of two parts.

1. First, the priest lays hands on the sick person in silence. As with Baptism (where it can be a preliminary symbol for the sacrament), Confirmation and Holy Orders, the laying on of hands indicates a conferral of the strength of God. In addition, as with those sacraments and the Mass, the laying on of hands invokes the Holy Spirit and His grace of calling. See Acts 13:3.

2. Then, usually after a Trinitarian prayer, the priest anoints the person's head and hands (representing thought and action) with an oil blessed for the purpose. Here, the oil of the infirm symbolizes the healing power of God, for in ancient times oil was often used for the healing of injuries or wounds.

- When anointing the head, the priest says, "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit." This aspect represents more grace coming in from heaven.

- "When anointing the hands, the priest says, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." This aspect, with the words taken from the Letter of James, reflects the idea of rising up from earthly infirmities, of body, mind and spirit.

F. Then all people together pray the Our Father, the perfect prayer taught by Jesus Himself.

G. There is then a closing prayer, which can be taken from several options depending on the circumstances (e.g., old age, grave illness, surgery.)

H. The recipient of this sacrament and all present who are able to do so would then usually receive the Eucharist.

III. The sacrament confers, above all else, healing and strength of mind and spirit, but also can confer physical healing.

A. The primary focus of the sacrament is a healing of spirit and ability to deal with the illness in a positive fashion, allowing it to lead one more to holiness. This effect includes forgiveness of sins when Confession is not feasible. It is this strengthening of spirit that is most important. When Christ cured the sick, He emphasized this aspect most of all. See, e.g., Mark 2:5.

B. Second, the sick person is consecrated to be more like Christ, who bore our infirmities and heal our illnesses. See Isaiah 53. Innocent suffering, when borne with grace, takes evil out of the world and transforms it into faith, hope, and charity. See Col. 1:24-26.

C. On a related point, the anointing gives the sick person a special status in the Church, as one able to pray all the more for the Church and to be a more glorious witness to the faith. See, e.g., Col. 1:24; Job 42:7-9.

D. If the sick person is going to die, the sacrament prepares him for this final journey, giving him a special sense of Christ's presence with Him at the end.

- If a person is likely to die very soon, the sacrament is called Extreme Unction, popularly known as Last Rites. There are special prayers involved, asking God to forgive the recipient of all the temporal punishments due to sin and help him to eternal life. The recipient preferably also receives Holy Communion, which is called Viaticum, reflecting the prayer that the Lord will be with him.

E. The sacrament may also confer physical healing if that would be helpful to the recipient's salvation or that of others. It should be noted that physical healings may be more likely in the case of people who are beginning a life of faith, for they are often in more need of time for strength and preparation for heaven.

F. As with the other sacraments, in order for the Anointing of the Sick to be effective, it must be received in faith.

1. In the case of a person who is unconscious or unable to respond, this desire to receive the sacrament and faith in it can be presumed to continue from a previous time.

2. In general, only Catholic or members of the Orthodox churches would receive the sacraments of the Eucharist, Confession and Anointing of the Sick. However, in danger of death (which is presumably present if this sacrament is administered), any baptized Christian who believes in the efficacy of the sacraments can receive them. See Code of Canon Law 844 section 4.