



A SACRAMENT OF HEALING: ANOINTING OF THE SICK AND THE PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY HOME

God has given us a beautiful gift by providing a sacrament for all the stages and important moments of our life. In baptism, we are spiritually born through receiving God’s life within our soul. In the Eucharist, this divine life is nourished through receiving Jesus Himself. In confirmation, we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit to assume full responsibilities as mature Christians of the Church. In confession, the Divine Physician heals us as we are wounded by personal sin. In holy orders, priests are ordained to act in the person of Christ to celebrate the sacraments, all ordered to forgive our sins and to strengthen us to live the Christian life. In matrimony, husband and wife receive the grace—the ongoing strength—to love each

other with the love with which Christ has loved His Church. And lastly, in the anointing of the sick, people who are sick and/or elderly, through anointing with oil and the prayer of the priest, receive grace for the salvation of their souls and, in God’s timing, bodily healing. In reflecting on God’s full-scale plan to assist us comprehensively on our journey to heaven, it is safe to say that we have an abundantly thoughtful and generous Heavenly Father.

This article, the final in a series on the seven sacraments, will focus on the anointing of the sick. This sacrament “is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.” (CCC #1514) This sacrament of anointing is important because when we are seriously sick or an illness is prolonged, there can be the temptation to doubt God’s personal love.

“The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage ... This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death. This assistance from the Lord by the power of His Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God’s will.” (CCC #1520) The sacrament will strengthen the sick person with hope to hold fast to the truth that God’s will is always to assist us, spiritually and sometimes physically, when we are suffering.

Jesus established this sacrament of healing. Scripture describes Jesus as the physician of our souls and bodies. During His earthly ministry, He healed the sick both spiritually and physically. He also promised that when His disciples would lay their hands on the sick, healing would occur. (cf. Mk 16:17-18) The Letter of James bears witness to the fact that the first priests of the Church anointed the sick. “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters (priests) of the Church and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 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. (Jas 5:14-15)

We can learn a lot about the mystery of suffering and Jesus’ intention regarding healing through looking at three Scripture passages that shed light while we ponder this subject prayerfully. When Jesus was in Capernaum, four people carried a paralytic to the house where He was staying. The house was packed

“IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT WE DON'T WANT TO WAIT TOO LONG TO HAVE A LOVED ONE ANOINTED.”

with people, but in their compassion for their friend, these four individuals made an opening in the roof and lowered the man down next to Jesus. The four were willing to do anything to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus to receive healing. Jesus first forgave the sins of the paralytic, because spiritual healing is more important, as it is necessary, for eternal life. Jesus then healed the paralytic physically, commanding him, “Rise, pick up your mat, and go home.” (Mk 2:11)

In another instance, while in Jerusalem, Jesus saw a man who was blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus whose sin caused this man to be blind. Jesus responded it was neither the blind man's sin nor his parents; they had done nothing wrong to cause the blindness. Rather, this was an opportunity for the works of God and His Glory to be revealed through the healing of the blind man. (cf. Jn 9:1-3) It is important to remember that Jesus is God and He is perfect goodness. He always sees in every “bad” situation an occasion to overcome evil with good.

When in Caesareā Philippi, Jesus met a father who had brought his son to be healed from an evil spirit. From childhood, the spirit would throw the boy into fire, and then water, to destroy him. The father begged Jesus, “‘But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, “‘If you can!’ Everything is possible to one who has faith.’ Then the boy's father cried out, ‘I do believe, help my unbelief!’” (Mk 9:20-24) Jesus honored the honesty of the request of this man, granting him the faith he needed, and healed his son. So, if we lack faith as we go to Jesus, He will give us the faith we need to receive what He desires to give us.

What we also know from Scripture is that Jesus never refused anyone who came to Him seeking healing. The critical thing for us to remember is timing. Sometimes, healing is a process that takes place over a period of time. However, if healing doesn't happen on earth, it will happen in eternity.

The Prayer of Anointing that is prayed during the celebration of the sacrament expresses specific requests: “When afraid, give courage, when afflicted, give patience, when dejected, afford hope, and when alone, assure support of your holy people. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.” The Lord answers these requests in strengthening the soul of the sick person by

awakening confidence in His mercy. It also gives the strength to bear suffering and resist the temptation to turn away from Him in this weakened situation.

WHEN A PERSON IS FACING DEATH— PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY HOME

When we are sick and possibly in danger of death, or actually facing imminent death, God's grace from the sacrament of anointing strengthens our souls and bodies in this vulnerable state to help us to heal or to die in a state of grace.

It is important to remember that we don't want to wait too long to have a loved one anointed. Time is of the essence. Father D. Joseph Redfern, a priest of the Diocese of La Crosse, recounts when he was called to the hospital at 11 p.m. to anoint a man. After the anointing, the man's wife was talking to Father Redfern, literally across the bed, when her husband died. If his wife would have thought this could have waited till morning, this incredible opportunity would have been lost. A good thought to have is, call the priest sooner rather than later.

“In addition to the anointing of the sick, the Church offers those who are about to leave this life the Eucharist as viaticum. Communion in the body and blood of Christ, received at this moment of “passing over” to the Father, has a particular significance and importance. It is the seed of eternal life and the power of resurrection, according to the words of the Lord: ‘He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.’” (CCC #1524) The Eucharist, the sacrament of the Risen Christ who has overcome death, is “food for the journey” of passing over from death to eternal life, from this world to the Father.

If death is imminent, and the person is able, the sacrament of confession precedes the anointing. “... 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.’” (CCC #1525)

In summary, at the heart of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick is the person of Jesus Christ. It is important to remember that suffering will always remain a mystery; but what we do know is that God always wants to come to us with His grace, to alleviate and aid us when we suffer. Our part is to always seek to be growing in our relationship with Jesus above everything else. As we pray for healing, and as we leave the “how” and “when” to Him, healing will come either now or, ultimately, in eternal life. †



ANN LANKFORD

Director of the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization