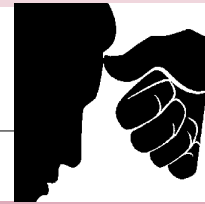


# For Our Healing: The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

by Woodene Koenig-Bricker



"It's just for old people."

"You can only receive it if you're really sick with something like cancer."

"You get it right before you die."

If you, like these teens, think the Anointing of the Sick is just for the extremely old or the critically ill, or if you assume the only time you can receive it is at the moment of death, you aren't alone. Most Catholics still think of the sacrament that way.

"I didn't know anything about it before I received it," says Bridget, a high school sophomore who was anointed while struggling with anorexia. "I thought it was for older people or people who were dying. I'd never seen a kid get it before."

While it's true the Anointing of the Sick is one of the ways the Church helps prepare us for death, it's much more than that. It's a celebration of Jesus' promise that we will have life and have it abundantly. It's the sign of Christ's healing presence in the world. And, as Bridget shows us, it's not just for the elderly.

Anyone, regardless of age, can receive the sacrament if his or her health is seriously impaired. It can also be administered before surgery and, contrary to many people's belief, it can be received more than once if the original illness gets worse or if another serious sickness is diagnosed. In fact, as Bridget's illness grew more critical, she received the sacrament again.

In this *Youth Update*, we're going to take a closer look at the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. While you may not have any reason to experience the sacrament yourself, you may have elderly grandparents or relatives who will. Or you may have a friend who becomes critically ill or who is in a serious accident. By knowing a little about the sacrament, you'll be able to participate more fully in its graces when you have the chance.

## What's Going On?

In the letter of James in the Bible, he writes, "Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters [those who have authority] of the Church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the

name of the Lord, and 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" (5:14-15).

The words St. James wrote are still true today. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is our way of continuing the healing work Jesus began 2,000 years ago.

You might be asking yourself, "Does that mean people who receive the Sacrament of the Sick are really going to get well, even if they have something serious like cancer?" Yes—and no.

While we can say with confidence that healing always occurs during the Anointing of the Sick, it isn't always the kind of healing we might expect.

"At first I thought it would cure me and I was disappointed when I wasn't cured right away," says Bridget. "Then it became clearer the healing had to come from within me. The healing wasn't an immediate recovery. I had to be open; to let things happen. I couldn't expect something overnight."

Even after we've been anointed, God may allow us to continue to be physically ill, but he also gives us his word that healing will take place on one level or another. We may be healed emotionally or spiritually rather than physically. While we often assume getting physically well is the best thing for us, God may know we need to come to a greater awareness of the divine and may choose to heal some area of our spirit or emotions instead of our body.

"I learned if you don't go looking for healing, it will be revealed in some other way," Bridget adds.

We should also remember the sacrament complements medical treatment; it doesn't replace it. Just because someone gets better with the help of surgery or modern drugs doesn't mean the sacrament didn't play a part in the healing. God uses the skill of doctors and nurses as well as modern medical techniques to restore health.

If all that sounds like so much double-talk, it might help to remember the sacrament isn't magic. It doesn't promise that those who receive it will be cured of all physical sickness. It doesn't promise that someone who is 99 will live another 30 years. What it does promise is that God will heal the broken areas of our life if we approach with faith and humility.

While it isn't common, immediate physical healing can happen. I know of at least one instance in my own family when medical tests administered after the person was anointed showed no trace of the previous illness. The very real possibility of a physical cure is one reason the Church doesn't want us to wait until we are at death's door before asking for the sacrament.

In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the Church says, "As soon as one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the appropriate time to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived." In other words, along with appropriate medical treatment, we should give God the opportunity to help cure our serious sickness.

"What happened was that I began to want to change," says Bridget. "It was something I wasn't expecting. Before the sacrament, I wasn't open to letting God in my life. I needed something to put him back in my life. When I received the Sacrament of Anointing, I realized how important he is," she says.

## The Rite of Anointing

Despite its potential for drama, the Anointing of the Sick may be the most low-key of all the sacraments. "After it was all over, I thought, 'This is it? Now I'm supposed to be healed?'" says Bridget. "I felt kind of empty after the process, like I was waiting for a flashing light or something."

Her reaction is common. The first time I saw an anointing, I was surprised at how short and unexciting the ceremony was. All the priest did was say a few prayers and read a Scripture passage. Then he placed his hands on the person's head and prayed silently. Finally, he took out some holy oil and rubbed a little on the person's forehead and palms. The whole event took less than 10 minutes.

Those two elements—prayer and anointing with oil—are the essence of the sacrament, the parts that must be performed for it to be valid. What else happens depends on how much time is available, the condition of the patient and individual desire. The priest may distribute Communion to the person being anointed and anyone else who wants to receive. Finally, he may merely end the service with a simple prayer and blessing.

Normally the priest brings everything he needs, but 20 or 30 years ago, most families owned a "sick call set"—a crucifix with a sliding lid which contained a bottle of holy water and candles—so the priest wouldn't have to gather all the supplies if he were called in the middle of the night.

Since the sacrament requires little in the way of space or materials, it can be administered almost anywhere people need the healing touch of Christ from bedrooms to battlefields, from living rooms to ambulances. Some parishes now offer a communal Anoint-

ing once or twice a year, inviting all parishioners who are ill to participate.

"I'm glad I received it," Bridget says. "Kids worry about their image and don't like to be known as being religious, but I don't feel embarrassed to have had the sacrament. I feel really thankful. If priests had the anointing for youth at a youth Mass, maybe more would come. You feel really out of place when everyone who goes up to the altar is 60 years old."

## Jesus, the Healer

The Anointing of the Sick is a sacrament which certainly mirrors the actions of Jesus when he walked the earth, spending much of his time healing the sick. In fact, most of his miracles involved curing some kind of illness. From the beginning of his ministry, his reputation as a healer spread rapidly. At times so many people wanted him to perform miracles of healing, he could hardly get out of the house. Staying inside didn't help. In his Gospel, Luke tells us about some people who were so anxious to have Jesus cure their paralyzed friend that they cut a hole in the roof of the house and lowered the sick man down to him (see Luke 5:18-19)! Although people made what seem like unreasonable demands on him and his time, we don't have any record of Jesus turning down someone who came to him for help. When John the Baptist sent his followers to ask Jesus if he were the Messiah, he answered, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Luke 7:22). Jesus showed himself to be the long-awaited Savior by becoming a healer.

After his death and resurrection, Jesus' disciples continued to heal the sick. In Chapter Three of the Book of Acts, a man who had been crippled from birth asked Peter for some money. Peter said he didn't have any gold or silver, but he said he would give the crippled man something better—the ability to walk. Then, we are told, Peter helped him up and the newly-cured man began to jump around, praising God (see Acts 3:1-9). While we are sometimes a little skeptical, the early Church took it for granted God would answer prayers for healing.

### Church Continues Jesus' Work

If the whole purpose of the sacrament is to help heal people and continue the work Jesus did when he was on earth, how did it become so linked with death, dying and old age? Why did a sacrament of healing become known as "Extreme Unction" or "Last Rites"?

One reason for the change may be that when medical science was first developing, it was as likely to kill as to cure, so people put off calling a doctor until they were nearly dead and thus had little to lose. The same may have held true for doctors of the soul, with people waiting until the last minutes of life to call for a priest. Today, even though medical practices have improved and people are willing to call a medical

doctor, the superstition that Anointing should be the last action before death seems to have stuck.

Another reason Anointing was seen as the last step in life's journey may be because people began to think of the sacrament as the final chance to reconcile with God before death. Because Anointing of the Sick has the power to forgive sin as well as heal, people waited until they were sure they were dying to ask for it. If possible, a dying person would go to Confession, receive Communion and then receive the Last Rites. If he or she were already so near death that Confession and Communion weren't possible, then they had the heavenly insurance, so to speak, of receiving forgiveness through the Last Rites.

If physical healing did take place—as it sometimes did—it came as quite a surprise to everyone, including the anointed person who equated the rites with certain death. In some places, in fact, the erroneous teaching arose that if you were physically cured, you would have to remain celibate the rest of your life! With that in mind, it's not surprising people were reluctant to call the priest too early in an illness.

The difficulty with all this is that while Anointing is a way to have your sins forgiven, it isn't supposed to take the place of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). Because Anointing was in danger of becoming just another form of confession at the time of death, Vatican II changed the prayers accompanying the anointing to reemphasize its healing character. The emphasis returned to prayers for recovery of physical, mental or spiritual health.

But lots of Catholics don't understand the changes.

"In religion class we mostly talked about how it used to be associated with death," says Bridget. "Now that I've received it, I think it ought to be emphasized it's not just for the dying. It's for any form of illness—emotional or physical." If that illness places a person in danger of death, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is most appropriate.

## Sacrament of Health

Anointing of the Sick is the way we as Catholics call on the healing, restoring power of Jesus when we are at our lowest and most vulnerable. It's a way we can gain the strength to bear suffering with patience and dignity. And it's a way of reminding ourselves that no matter what happens in life or death, Jesus will be there beside us and the people we love.

While it isn't intended to be used for our everyday aches and pains, sniffles and sneezes, it should be requested in those times of serious illness when we need a special sign of God's love and care. "It was a renewal," says Bridget. "It was like I had another chance to start over. Having that reassurance from God helped me get well."

## How the Sacrament is Celebrated

### Introductory Rite

The priest gives a formal greeting to those present.

The priest sprinkles holy water around the room and on the sick person as a reminder of Baptism.

An opening prayer is prayed together and a Penitential Rite (or expression of sorrow for sin) is led.

### Liturgy of the Word

Text from Scripture is read by the priest or someone else present. These readings may be either Matthew 11:25-30, Mark 2:1-12 or Luke 7:19-23. Silence follows the reading.

### Liturgy of Anointing

A litany for the sick person is led by the priest.

Next, in silence, the priest lays his hands on the head of the sick person.

The priest then blesses the oil, or, if the oil is already blessed, says a prayer of thanksgiving.

The sick person is anointed on the forehead and hands; a prayer follows the anointing. The prayer for a young person is as follows:

"God our healer, in this time of sickness you have come to bless N. with your grace. Restore him/her to health and strength, make him/her joyful in spirit, and ready to embrace your will. Grant this through Christ our Lord."

Next, the Lord's Prayer is said.

Then, in many cases, the Liturgy of Holy Communion will be celebrated for all present.

Q. If someone is mentally ill and resists having the Sacrament of Anointing administered, but the family insists, will that person still get the benefits of healing?

A. Yes. The benefits of Anointing don't depend on a person's feelings any more than the grace of Baptism depends on a baby's feelings. Ideally, people ask for the sacrament themselves, but if they can't because of physical or emotional illness, someone else can request it. The Church gives the benefit of the doubt by assuming that if a person could ask for the sacrament, he or she would.

Q. You said you can receive the sacrament more than once if an illness gets worse. Why would you want to do that? Isn't it good enough the first time?

A. The sacraments are always good enough, but sometimes we don't receive them as fully or as perfectly as we might. That's one reason we go to Mass every Sunday. If we feel we need God's special presence to help us in our illness, the Church says we can request to be anointed again. To make sure people don't misuse or abuse the sacrament, however, there generally has to be some change in a person's condition before the second anointing. For example, a person with leukemia might request the sacrament when the illness is first diagnosed. If that person later requires hospitalization, he or she could (and probably should) be anointed again.

Q. How serious does an illness have to be before a person can be anointed?

A. The usual criterion is that the sickness has to have the possibility of ending in death, but that doesn't mean the person has to be on the brink of death. People who are mentally ill, for example, can be anointed if they are a danger to themselves and their own well-being. Chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes are also considered "serious" because they can quickly develop into life-threatening conditions. In general, if an illness is serious enough that the person is concerned about recovery, a priest will administer the sacrament.

IS ANY MAN SICK AMONG YOU?  
LET HIM BRING IN THE PRIESTS OF  
THE CHURCH, AND LET THEM  
PRAY OVER HIM, ANOINTING HIM  
WITH OIL IN THE NAME OF THE  
LORD. AND THE PRAYER OF FAITH  
SHALL SAVE THE SICK MAN; AND  
THE LORD SHALL RAISE HIM UP:  
AND IF HE BE IN SINS, THEY SHALL  
BE FORGIVEN HIM.

JAMES 5:14-25

**Woodeene Koenig-Bricker is a lifelong Catholic who remembers her grandfather's sick call set which always hung above his bed. She and her husband and son share their lives with a trusting golden retriever and two very intense cats. Woodeene writes articles on a variety of topics ranging from Church history to sacraments to "how to take a vacation on a shoestring budget."**

*Angie Hebert, 15; Anie Makyadath, 17; Wendy Norris, 18; Brian Phillips, 16; Tim Retford, 18; and Angie Setzler, 15, of St. Mary Parish in Eugene, Oregon, met with author Woodeene Koenig-Bricker to review this article. George Hebling, youth minister at the parish, also joined them. The six teens wanted to know all the scriptural sources (now included) and asked the three questions for which we all have some answers now.*

Reprinted from "Youth Update: For Our Healing: Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick"