

Sacraments ~ Part 8

At the end of Christian life, Penance, Eucharist (last Eucharist) and the Anointing of the Sick, are sacraments that complete the earthly journey in Christ begun with Baptism. They 'prepare for our heavenly homeland' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, pars 1523 and 1525).

Jesus Christ is very close to someone who is dying. This is the final journey into his dying and rising to eternal life. Someone facing the real possibility of death encounters the Risen Jesus through the Last Rites. A priest administers Penance, Viaticum (a name for Eucharist received for the last time) and the Anointing of the Sick.

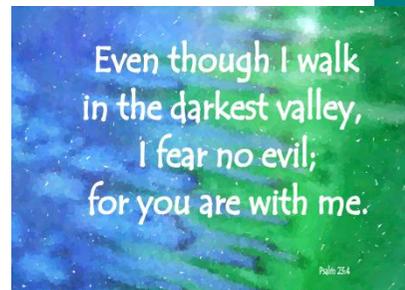
*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
Whoever eats of this bread will live forever"*
(John 6:51)

Viaticum is food for the final journey that may also be given by a lay person. The Catechism speaks of final Eucharist as 'the seed of eternal life and the power of the resurrection' (Catechism par 1524). A small piece of consecrated bread or drop of consecrated wine may be given if the sick person finds it hard to swallow. A sip of water may be offered to help.

When a priest is not available, the lay person may also help the sick one to make an Act of Contrition. While this is not the same as the Sacrament of Penance, we know that God always hears a heartfelt prayer of sorrow for sin.

We conclude with a prayer from the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. May we join in praying this prayer for all who are sick and suffering in our world:

*Through this holy anointing
may the Lord in his love and mercy help you
with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
May the Lord who frees you from sin
save you and raise you up. Amen.*



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Anointing of the Sick

Sacraments of Healing

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The Sacrament of the Sick

*"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 5:14-15)

Jesus' Healer of the Sick

Even after long days of teaching, people brought their loved ones to Jesus for healing, of illness of body and spirit. When Simon Peter's mother in law was in bed at his house with a fever, Jesus 'came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them' (Mark 1:29-32). For hurting people he healed body and spirit. Healings were a major sign of the coming of God's kingdom through him physical healing was often connected with forgiveness of sin. Jesus identified with those who were sick and suffering when he praised 'I was sick and you visited me.'

Jesus asked the sick to believe in him. He made use of physical signs and touched them. He used earth and spittle to heal the man born blind, before sending him to wash in the Pool of Siloam (John 9).

*"Surely he has born our infirmities and carried our diseases...
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed"*
(Isaiah 53:4-5)

For Reflection:

Ask Jesus to be with you as you imagine yourself in one of the following biblical scenes.

Mark 6:6-13 Mark 8:22-25 Luke 10: 10-17 Acts 3:1-10

Pray for whatever is in need of healing for you at this time.

Jesus gave his disciples power to heal and sent them out to the surrounding countryside. As the early church communities developed, his followers continued this important work, as we see in the words of James' letter (James 5:12-15). They laid hands on the sick and anointed them with oil, an ancient symbol of strengthening and healing. The prayerful gesture of laying on of hands was of itself, a prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Oil, an ancient symbol of strengthening and healing was also used. For some, oil was applied generously to the parts of the body in need of healing.

As the Sacrament of Healing developed in form, the senses were the focus of anointing. Some may recognise a link here with the 'signing of the senses' for candidates in the RICA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process, before they receive the Sacraments for the first time. Lay people could share in this ministry, using oil blessed by the bishop. It was after the Council of Trent (1500s) that priests came to be the only ones administering this sacrament. Older adults today may recall a time when the Sacrament was called 'extreme unction', or 'final anointing') because for a time it was given only to those in danger of dying. The biblical understanding of this Sacrament, for all the sick, was recovered with the second Vatican Council. This healing Sacrament can also be given when age weakens the body or when someone is facing a serious operation. It may be received on different occasions during a lifetime. Regular celebrations of the Sacrament of the sick for parishes and regions are a good idea.

The Sacrament

In times of illness, suffering and pain, are times of great vulnerability. The sick person can feel miserable. For anyone facing permanent illness, the effects of aging, or for those who are nearing death, there is likely to be a time of grieving. Faith in a loving, caring God can be tested for some people. For others, God may seem far away and it can be hard to pray.

*Illness can lead to anguish, self absorption, sometimes even despair...
It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life
what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is.
Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.*
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, par 1501)

Sickness and suffering can separate people from normal social interaction with the wider community. Loneliness and isolation can be part of the experience of illness. In his lifetime, Jesus went out to people in these situations and responded with love and compassion when friends and families brought their sick to him. Sickness can also be a time of great spiritual growth. Someone who is ill knows their complete dependence on God's love. When someone is ill, they may not feel that God is close, yet the Spirit of Love and Healing comes into any heart that has room.



This Sacrament makes present the healing love and care of God. The laying on of hands is a sign of the outpouring of the grace of the Spirit. The Spirit brings strengthening and healing of Spirit, and sometimes of body. Often, the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be also be celebrated at this time, however, through this Sacrament, the sick person also experiences forgiveness of sins. This sacrament, best celebrated in the presence of family, friends and other members of the Christian community, is a sign of the support of the entire community's love and support.

There is an encounter with the Risen Christ and gifts of the Holy Spirit given through this Sacrament. The effects include; healing of spirit, forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God and fellow Christians, strengthening, comfort and, often, physical healing as well as greater peace of mind and special closeness with the Cross of Jesus Christ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, par 1520).

For anyone who is suffering, Jesus Christ says: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'. Then, because the grace and peace of Christ are within, the one who is ill can answer, 'Whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

If you are with someone when the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is administered, or receive the Sacrament yourself, whether in home, hospital or church, these are the steps:

The Rite

- Greeting
- Penitential rite (eg. like Mass)
- Brief Scripture passage, petitions for the sick
- Laying on of hands in silence
- Anointing of the sick person on the forehead and hands
- The priest prays a few words appropriate to the individual.
- Those present join in praying the Our Father.
- The sick person receives Holy Communion (if possible).
- There is a special blessing prayer for health, strength and endurance.

Viaticum and the Last Rites

*Martha came, heartbroken, to Jesus with the news that her brother,
and his friend, Lazarus had died.
Jesus answered, 'I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live'.
(John 11:25)*