

## Anointing of the Sick — formerly called Extreme Unction

### WHO IS IT FOR?

**The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is given to the faithful who have "begun to be in danger of death from sickness or old age".**

See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1527; the *Constitution on the Liturgy* §73 (Vatican Council II), which said that: "'EXTREME UNCTION,' which may also and more fittingly be called 'ANOINTING OF THE SICK,' is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone 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."

### HOW IS IT GIVEN?

This sacrament can be given only by a priest, whether Bishop or presbyter (i.e. 'priest of the second rank'), not by a deacon or layman. The priest lays his hand(s) on the head of the sick in a preliminary *sacramental* (as used by our Lord Himself, e.g. Mark 6:5; 8:23), and then confers the actual *sacrament*: he moistens his thumb on oil-soaked cotton wool in his oil-stock and makes a cross on the forehead of the sick person, saying, "**Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit,**" to which the sick and the bystanders should reply, "Amen;" and then a cross on the palm of each hand saying, "**May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up;**" and again the response is "Amen." The olive oil for the Anointing of the Sick is usually blessed by the Bishop of the Diocese at the Chrism Mass on the morning of Maundy Thursday.

### ACCURATE TRANSLATION?

The translation above by ICEL (International Commission for English in the Liturgy) was made from the revised Latin formula: *Per istam sanctum Unctionem et suam piissimam misericordiam, adiuvet te Dominus gratia Spiritus Sancti; (Amen.) ut a peccatis liberatum te salvet atque propitius allevet. (Amen.)*

A more accurate translation would have been, "Through this holy Anointing and his most loving mercy may the Lord help thee with the grace of the Holy Spirit; so **that** freed from sins he may save thee and mercifully raise thee up." The 'so that' has causative force: it implies that this sacrament can forgive sins, which is Church teaching based on James 5:15.

The coming new translations required by *Liturgiam Authenticam* §57 for 'ut' clauses expressing purpose (see *Catechetical News* 170 p. 5, of 6th August, 2001) will no doubt remedy this inadequacy.

### SCRIPTURAL BASIS OF THE SACRAMENT

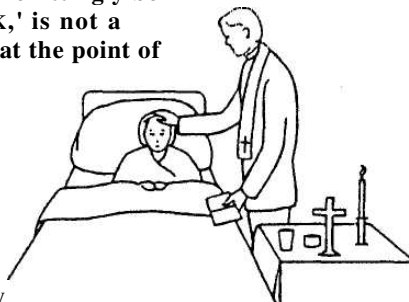
The apostles "anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them," Mark 6:13; (a 'sacramental' akin to St John the Baptist's 'baptism' before the Sac-

rament of Baptism was instituted by Our Lord).

Also, James 5:14-15: "Is any man sick among you? Let him call for 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." This text is always part of the preliminary ritual.

### WHAT IT ACHIEVES?

The Anointing of the Sick is one of the seven Sacraments instituted by Our Lord to give sanctifying grace. It involves the links between original sin, sickness and death; Christ's healing love for sinners and the sick; and our sharing in His sufferings if we are to share His glory in the future Resurrection of the Body.



*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1520ff states that, "The first grace of this Sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. 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 soul, but also of the body if such is God's will. Furthermore, 'if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.'"

Other effects of this Sacrament are "union with the Passion of Christ"; "an ecclesial grace... [to] contribute to the good of the People of God"; and "a preparation for the final journey." (*ibid.* §§1521-1523.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1532 sums up thus: "The special grace of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its effects:

- the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ;
- strengthening, peace and courage to endure suffering;
- forgiveness of sins if Penance was not available;
- restoration of bodily health if conducive to salvation;
- preparation for passing over to eternal life."

### WHO IS NOT ELIGIBLE?

• Those who are sick with a condition that is not life threatening do not receive the Anointing of the Sick. When in doubt, the sacrament should be given. Indiscriminate anointing of entire congregations is usually an abuse of the sacrament. Hospital patients needing an anesthetic for lesser surgery, e.g. for a cartilage removal, have not begun to be in danger of death from sickness and should not be anointed — unless during the operation the anesthetic itself produces a life-threatening condition. Anointing, however, is "fitting... prior to a serious operation;" see CCC §1515.

• Soldiers going into battle are in danger of death and can be given Viaticum (and General Absolution, if other conditions are fulfilled) but they are **not in dan-**

ger of death *from* sickness (not yet, anyway) and cannot be anointed unless they are seriously wounded.

- Sick children **cannot be anointed before the age of** reason, but in doubt the sacrament is to be given.
- **The dead cannot receive any sacraments.** But if there is doubt about the body being really dead, then the priest gives the sacrament 'conditionally', introducing the vital words with, "If you are alive..."
- The sacrament **cannot be repeated in the same illness unless the danger becomes more serious.** A chronic illness, however, can be counted as a new illness each month for the purpose of being anointed.

### THE LAST RITES?

'The Last Rites' is a popular but confusing expression. It tends to make people fear to call the priest or let him anoint them — almost a superstition that whoever a priest anoints will inevitably die, (something like the witch doctor 'pointing the bone').

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not speak of the Last Rites; rather, in §1524ff, it speaks of '**The Last Sacrament**' which is the last Holy Communion, that is, *viaticum*, food for the journey through death to particular judgement.

**The final rites for the dying are the Papal Blessing (to which is attached a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions), the remaking of the Baptismal Promises, and the reception of Holy Communion as Viaticum.**

Of itself, the Anointing of the Sick is not the Last Sacrament nor is it necessarily part of the final rites - nor Confession, either: *these should have been received earlier in the sickness.* But in practical situations all three sacraments are often given together in a **continuous rite** (popularly miscalled the Last Rites): Confession and Absolution; Papal Blessing; Baptismal Promises; Anointing; and Holy Communion.

### OTHER BLESSED OIL FOR THE SICK? NOT ANY MORE!

In the Tridentine *Roman Ritual* there was a blessing of olive oil as a *sacramental* distinct from the holy oil for the *sacrament*. After blessings for lambs, sheep, bread, first fruits and a general blessing of any comestible, there was a blessing of oil. Its purpose was described in the priest's prayer of blessing: "so that those who have need of this oil, which we have blessed in thy name, may be freed from all weariness, every infirmity [*infirmiate*, perhaps less serious than *infirmos*, 'sick'] and all the snares of the enemy..." Its use seems akin to that of holy water.

It was in view of this that *A Book of Blessings* of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1981, said: "It has long been a Catholic tradition to bless and use oil for sick persons to signify strength, comfort, and sometimes healing. This oil may also be given to the sick and used by them at home. Care should be taken to avoid any confusion between the sacrament of the anointing of the sick and the use of oil in blessing the sick."

However, *The Instruction on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the Sacramental Ministry of Priests*, dated 15th August, 1997, (released in December), in its Practical Provisions, article 9, §1, said: "In using sacramentals,

the non-ordained faithful should ensure that these are in no way regarded as sacraments whose administration is proper and exclusive to the Bishop and to the priest, **Since they are not priests, in no instance may the non-ordained faithful perform anointings either with the Oil of the Sick or any other oil.**"

### THE SICK OR THE DYING?

**Did the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965, contradict the 16th century Council of Trent? No!**

Interestingly, the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (in its second part, chapter VI, no. 2) states that, "This Sacrament is called *Extreme Unction* [Last Anointing; *unctio* is Latin for 'anointing'] **because among all the unctions** [e.g. at Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination] **prescribed by our Lord to His Church, this is the last to be administered.** For this reason it was also called by our predecessors in the faith, *the Sacrament of the anointing of the sick*, and also *the Sacrament of the dying*, names which easily turn the minds of the faithful to the remembrance of that last hour." (Cf. *The Code of Canon Law* c. 1004, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1514.)

The Council of Trent itself said that Extreme Unction is for the sick, especially the dying: "**This unction is to be applied to the sick, but especially to those who lie in such danger as to seem placed at their departure from this life:** whence, also, it is called the sacrament of the departing. But if the sick should recover, after having received this unction, then they may again be aided by the succour of this sacrament, when they fall into another like danger;" Trent, session XIV, chapter 3, found in DS 1698 (DB 910).

Thus the infallible tradition of the teaching Church was preserved in the Second Vatican Council and developed by it. The latter simply added a new emphasis: "*begin to be in danger of death...*"

### THE ROMAN RITUAL, OLD AND NEW...

Moreover, **there was no mention of dying** at all in the prayers of our former *Roman Ritual* from the Council of Trent, a ritual in use until 1972. As the psychologists say nowadays, it was all *positive...*

In fact, the priest said several prayers asking for the person to recover bodily health and even to get back to work! "We implore you, our Redeemer, that by the grace of the Holy Spirit you cure the illness of this sick man and heal his wounds; forgive his sins, and drive away from him all pains of mind and body. In your mercy give him health, inward and outward, so **that he may once more be able to take up his work**, restored by the gift of your mercy."

And again, "Free your servant from sickness, restore him his health, raise him up by your right hand, strengthen him by your might and give him back to your holy Church, with all that is needed for his welfare."

A useful addition in Vatican IPs revised *Roman Ritual* for the Anointing of the Sick is the provision of a prayer for those at the point of death. This better suits the situation where nothing short of a major miracle would save the sick person from bodily death.

In conclusion, the clear and authoritative teaching is that the Anointing of the Sick is for those who have **begun to be in danger of death from sickness.**