

Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

Jesus and the Sick

The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus showing compassion and mercy for those who suffered **physical illnesses or disabilities**, including those who were cast out of the community for those reasons. When Jesus approached and touched people who were ill or disfigured, he was making a radical statement.

In his time and culture, to be sick, disfigured, disabled, or even to have a flow of blood or bodily fluid rendered a person "**unclean**." Being unclean was "contagious," so anyone who touched an unclean person then became unclean themselves. Yet Jesus never hesitated to touch the unclean when so many others were socialized to avoid them, depriving them of human touch and companionship. In healing them, Jesus brought them **back into the community** and back into relationship.

Although we don't share the same beliefs about illnesses today, some people are still hesitant to draw near to people who are disabled, sick, or dying. Many elderly people know the **pain of loneliness** during a prolonged physical decline when it seems the rest of society forgets about them. Those with mental illness may experience people steering clear of them. People with contagious diseases often notice subtle signs of fear that others express when near them. Some people may feel that others judge them for having brought their illness upon themselves.

Why Anointing?

The sacrament of anointing is one of two sacraments of healing. It flows out of Jesus' willingness to lay his hands on people who were sick, as well as the practice described in the **Letter of James** in the New Testament. James exhorted his readers,

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 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. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (Jas. 5:13-16).

In ancient times, oil was commonly used as a healing ointment, and it was also used to signify God's blessing upon someone. **Anointing** today can act as a powerful sign for a sick person. When the priest lays hands on the sick, says a prayer, and anoints them with holy oil, he is communicating that the community is praying with them and for them, and that Jesus has not forgotten or abandoned them.

Does being anointed mean they will be physically cured? Not necessarily. But they will experience healing, perhaps as an experience of consolation, an easing of fear, or a sense of trust and peace. Maybe it will be the reminder people need that they are not alone. The sacrament calls for **healing in body, soul, and spirit**. It is a spiritual and emotional support to people who are enduring a difficult time.

Not the “Last Rites”

Decades ago, this sacrament was referred to as the “Last Rites” or “Extreme Unction,” and was **misunderstood** as being only for the dying. Even today, hospital chaplains are sometimes received with fear by patients who interpret, “I must be dying if the chaplain is here!” However, Vatican II reoriented the sacrament as a sign of the **care and concern of the community** for the sick, not an omen that one’s death is imminent.

How sick do you have to be to receive this sacrament? The church invites anyone “whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age” to receive it. For example, it is perfectly reasonable to request the sacrament before undergoing surgery, while struggling with chronic depression, or because you are elderly, even if not seriously ill. If a reminder of the peace and healing touch of Christ would be helpful in a particular situation of illness or injury, by all means, avail yourself of the grace available!

Ideally, the sacrament is celebrated when the sick person is conscious and can take part in the ritual. Sometimes family members don’t request the sacrament earlier in their loved one’s illness because they “don’t want to bother the priest.” But **calling earlier is preferable** to calling later if it means the sick person will be more alert and can actively participate. Plus, it’s much easier to find an available priest if you don’t wait until just before death. If in doubt, you can always ask a priest about the suitability of receiving this sacrament and the timing of it.

Receiving the Sacrament

Some parishes offer **communal anointing services** once or twice a year. They are generally celebrated as part of a Mass, and anyone suffering from a physical or mental ailment is welcome to come forward to be anointed during the ritual.

To receive the sacrament at another time, simply call your parish to **request it**. Any priest can administer the anointing, and the time and location can be arranged. If the priest will be coming to your home, the anointing can take place wherever it is most comfortable for the patient. The priest will bring everything necessary. Depending on the timing and the circumstances, the rite will probably include:

- ▶ Scripture reading
- ▶ Prayers of petition
- ▶ The priest laying his hands on the head of the sick person and praying silently
- ▶ A blessing over the oil
- ▶ The priest anointing the forehead and palms of the sick person
- ▶ Communion (depending on the circumstances)

If the sick person is in the **hospital**, ask about contacting a member of the pastoral care or chaplaincy department. There may be a priest on staff who is available for this purpose. Otherwise, call your parish to request a visit.

Because this is no longer seen as a sacrament for the dying, it is perfectly acceptable to receive the sacrament **multiple times** in your lifetime, either for the same or different illnesses. Even children may be anointed.

A final word of consolation... if you know a loved one who has **died before receiving** the consolation of being anointed, take heart that God’s love, compassion, and mercy can fill any void left by humans. God’s grace is beyond our comprehension, and we can entrust our loved ones to that care.

Dig deeper: CCC: #1499-1532; CCA: Chapter 19; *Our Catholic Life*: Book 5, Session 5.

*Copyright © 2018 Ann Naffziger. All rights reserved.
Reprinted with permission. Published by The Pastoral Center /
PastoralCenter.com. All rights reserved.*